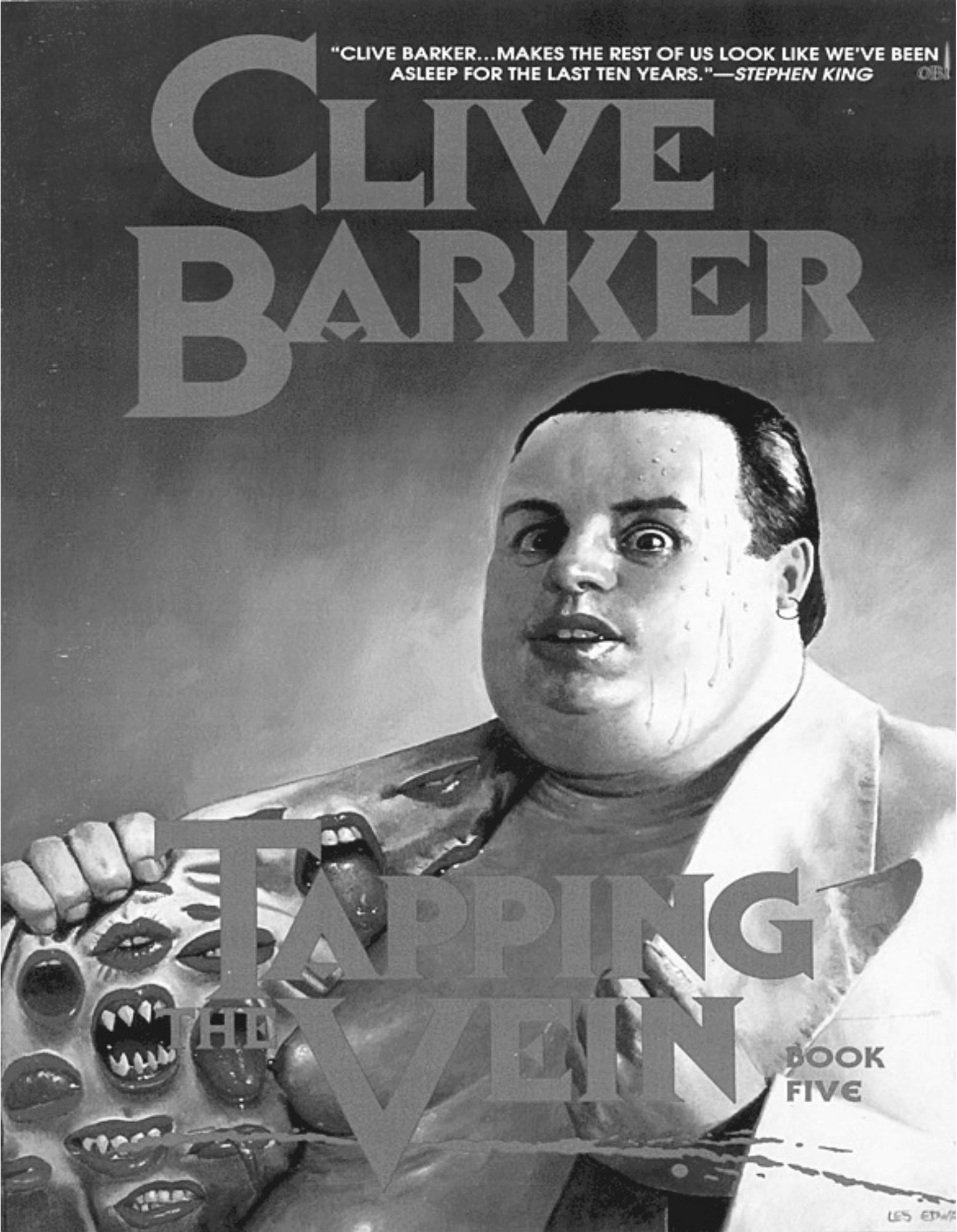
VISIT…

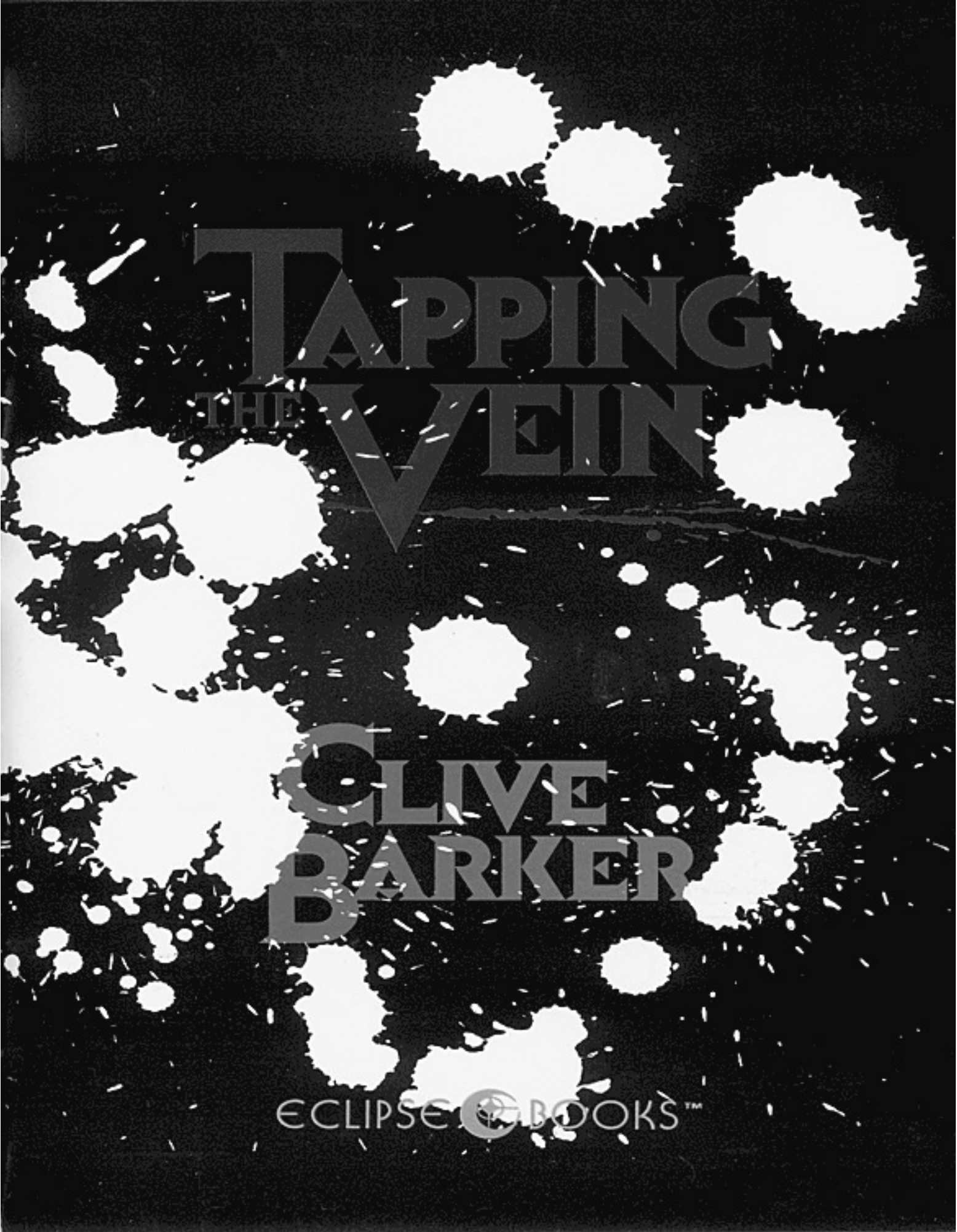
"CLIVE BARKER...MAKES THE REST OF US LOOK LIKE WE'VE BEEN ASLEEP FOR THE LAST TEN YEARS."—*STEPHEN KING*

CLIVE BARKER



TAPPING THE VEIN

BOOK FIVE


TAPPING
THE VEIN
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BARKER
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How Spoilers Bleed

Illustrated by Hector Gomez
Adapted by Steve Niles
and Fred Burke
Lettered by Willie Schubert

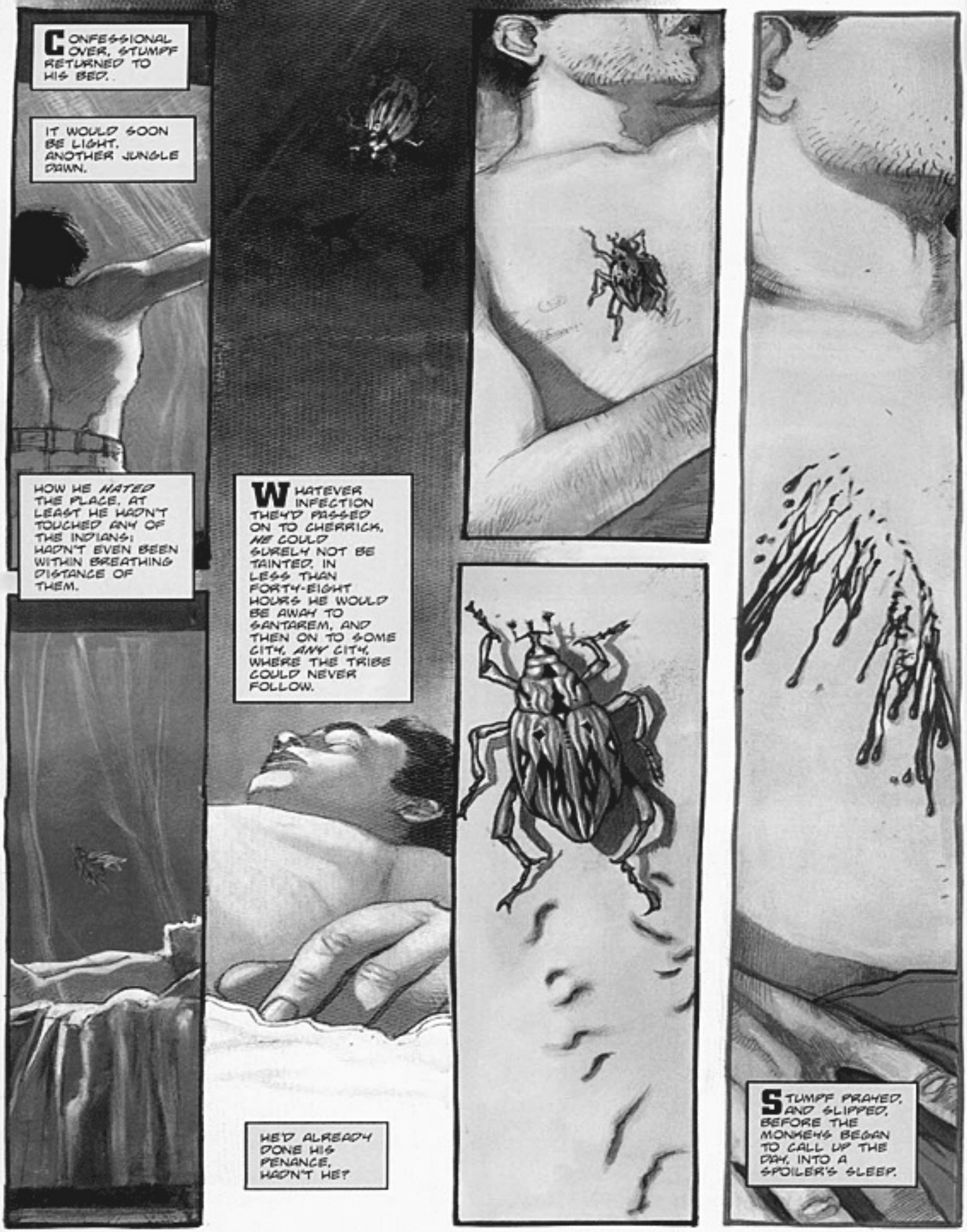
Down, Satan

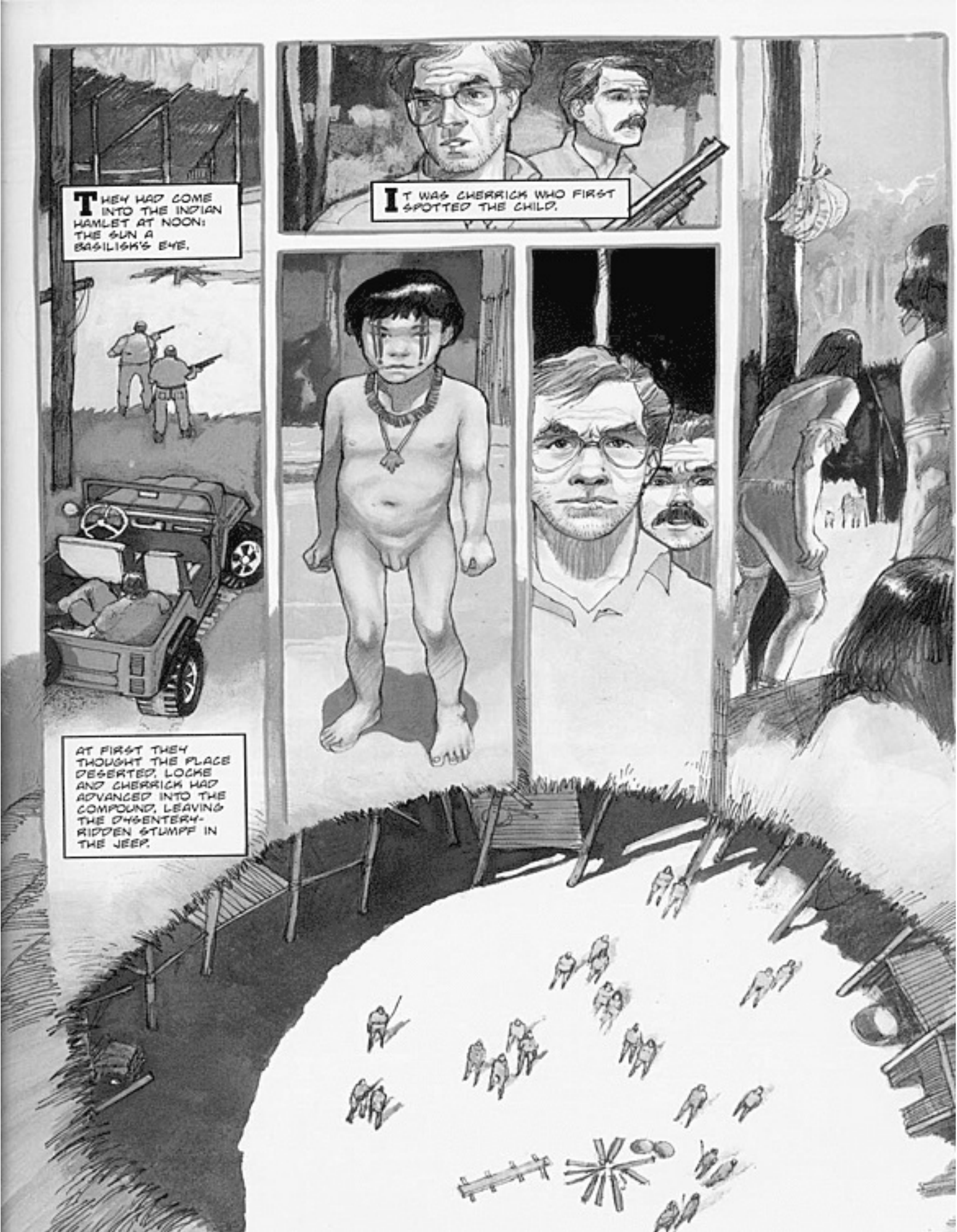
Illustrated by Tim Conrad
Adapted by Steve Niles
Lettered by Willie Schubert

HOUSE OF SPLINTERS BLEED
LOCKE RAISED HIS EYES TO THE TREES. THE WIND WAS MOVING IN THEM, AND THE COMMOTION OF THEIR LADEN BRANCHES SOUNDED LIKE THE RIVER IN FULL SPATE. ONE IMPERSONATION OF MANY. WHEN HE HAD FIRST COME TO THE JUNGLE, HE HAD BEEN AWED BY THE SHEER MULTIPLICITY OF BEAST AND BLOSSOM, THE RESTLESS PARADE OF LIFE. BUT HE HAD LEARNED BETTER. THIS BURGEONING DIVERSITY WAS A SHAM: THE JUNGLE PRETENDED ITSELF AN ARTLESS GARDEN. IT WAS NOT.
WHERE THE UNTUTORED TRESPASSER SAW ONLY A BRILLIANT SHOW OF NATURAL SPLENDOURS, LOCKE NOW RECOGNISED A SUBTLE CONSPIRACY AT WORK, IN WHICH EACH THING MIRRORED SOME OTHER THING.
ROUND AND ROUND IN A DIZZYING CIRCLE OF IMPERSONATIONS, A HALL OF MIRRORS WHICH CONFOUNDED THE SENSES AND WOULD, GIVEN TIME, ROT REASON ALTOGETHER.
HECTOR

LOCKE?
LOCKE, ARE YOU AWAKE?
WHAT DO YOU WANT?
I CAN'T SLEEP. I'VE BEEN THINKING. THE SUPPLY PLANE COMES IN FROM SANTAREM THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW. WE COULD BE BACK THERE IN A FEW HOURS, OUT OF ALL THIS.
I MEAN PERMANENTLY... AWAH.
PERMANENTLY?
I DON'T BELIEVE IN CURSES. DON'T THINK I DO. BUT YOU SAW CHERRICK'S BODY...WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.
THERE'S A DISEASE--WHAT'S IT CALLED? WHEN THE BLOOD DOESN'T SET PROPERLY?
HEMOPHILIA. HE DIDN'T HAVE HEMOPHILIA AND WE BOTH KNOW IT. I'VE SEEN HIM CUT A MILLION TIMES. HE MENDED LIKE YOU OR I DO.
ALL RIGHT. THEN WHAT KILLED HIM?

YOU SAW THE WOUNDS BETTER THAN I DID. BUT IT SEEMED TO ME HIS SKIN JUST BROKE OPEN AS SOON AS HE WAS TOUCHED. MAYBE IT'S SOMETHING HE CAUGHT OFF THE INDIANS.
I DIDN'T TOUCH ANY OF THEM.
NEITHER DID I. BUT CHERRICK DID. REMEMBER?
IT'S YOUR FUNERAL.
I MEAN IT. I'M NOT LIKE YOU. NEVER REALLY HAD THE STOMACH FOR THIS KIND OF THING. WILL YOU BUY MY THIRD OFF ME?
LOCKE REMEMBERED: SCENES LIKE THAT WEREN'T EASY TO FORGET, TRY AS HE MIGHT.
THEY'RE NOT GOING TO.
I'M GOING BACK TO SANTAREM. I DON'T WANT THEM COMING, LOOKING FOR ME.
HOW DO YOU KNOW? WE SCREWED UP BACK THERE. WE COULD HAVE BRIBED THEM. GOT THEM OFF THE LAND SOME OTHER WAY.
DEPENDS ON THE PRICE.
WHATEVER YOU WANT TO GIVE. IT'S YOURS.
I DOUBT IT. YOU HEARD WHAT TETELMAN SAID. ANCESTRAL TERRITORIES.
YOU CAN HAVE MY SHARE OF THE LAND. I WANT NO PART OF IT. I FEEL DIRTY. WE'RE SPOILERS, LOCKE.


CONFESSIONAL OVER, STUMPF RETURNED TO HIS BED.
IT WOULD SOON BE LIGHT. ANOTHER JUNGLE DAWN.
HOW HE *HATED* THE PLACE. AT LEAST HE HADN'T TOUCHED ANY OF THE INDIANS: HADN'T EVEN BEEN WITHIN BREATHING DISTANCE OF THEM.
WHATEVER INFECTION THEY'D PASSED ON TO CHERRICK, *HE* COULD SURELY NOT BE TAINTED. IN LESS THAN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS HE WOULD BE AWAY TO SANTAREM, AND THEN ON TO SOME CITY, *ANY* CITY, WHERE THE TRIBE COULD NEVER FOLLOW.
HE'D ALREADY DONE HIS PENANCE, HADN'T HE?
STUMPF PRAYED, AND SLIPPED, BEFORE THE MONKEYS BEGAN TO CALL UP THE DAY, INTO A SPOILER'S SLEEP.


THEY HAD COME INTO THE INDIAN HAMLET AT NOON: THE SUN A BASILISK'S EYE.
IT WAS CHERRICK WHO FIRST SPOTTED THE CHILD.
AT FIRST THEY THOUGHT THE PLACE DESERTED. LOCKE AND CHERRICK HAD ADVANCED INTO THE COMPOUND, LEAVING THE DYSENTERY-RIDDEN STUMPF IN THE JEEP.

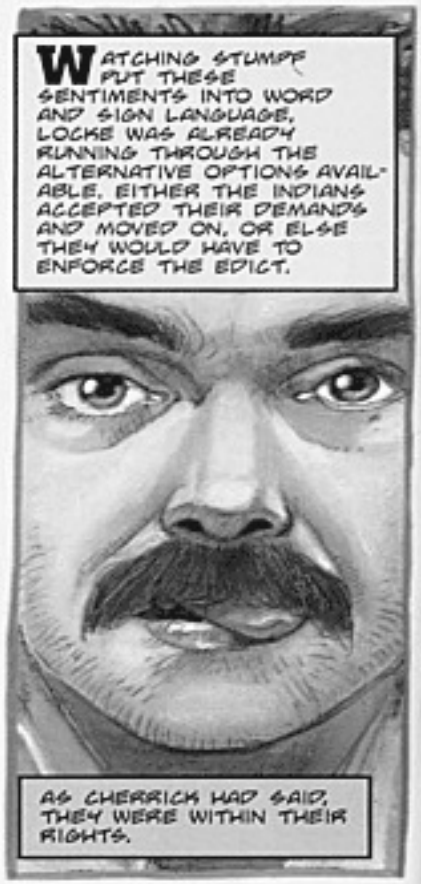
IF THERE WAS A FLICKER OF FEELING ON THEIR FACES, LOCKE COULD NOT READ IT. THESE PEOPLE WERE IMPOSSIBLE TO DECIPHER: DECEIT WAS THEIR ONLY SKILL.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? THIS IS OUR LAND.
THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND YOU.
GET THE KRAUT OUT HERE. LET HIM EXPLAIN IT TO THEM.
HE CAN'T MOVE.
GET HIM OUT HERE. I DON'T CARE IF HE'S SHAT HIS PANTS.
GHERRICK EASED AWAY, LEAVING LOCKE STANDING IN THE RING OF HUTS.
THERE WERE AT MOST TWO DOZEN INDIANS, DESCENDANTS OF THE GREAT PEOPLE THAT HAD ONCE ROAMED THE AMAZON BASIN IN THEIR TENS OF THOUSANDS.
NOW THOSE TRIBES WERE ALL BUT DECIMATED. THE FOREST IN WHICH THEY HAD PROSPERED FOR GENERATIONS WAS BEING LEVELLED AND BURNED; EIGHT-LANE HIGHWAYS WERE SPEEDING THROUGH THEIR HUNTING GROUNDS. ALL THEY HELD SACRED WAS BEING TRAMPLED AND TRESPASSED.
THEY WERE EXILES IN THEIR OWN LAND.
BUT STILL THEY DECLINED TO PAY HOMAGE TO THEIR NEW MASTERS, DESPITE THE RIFLES THEY BROUGHT.
ONLY DEATH WOULD CONVINCE THEM OF DEFEAT, LOCKE MUSED.

LOCKE WANTS YOU.
I CAN'T MOVE. I'M DYING--
LOCKE WANTS YOU DEAD OR ALIVE.
ALL RIGHT. HELP ME.
WE GOT TRESPASSERS.
TELL THEM TO GET THE FUCK OFF OUR LAND. TELL THEM THIS IS OUR TERRITORY. WE BOUGHT IT. WITHOUT SITTING TENANTS.
GO ON!
SO I SEE.
STUMPF TOOK SEVERAL SECONDS TO WORK OUT HIS FATHER, THEN SPOKE A FEW WILTING WORDS IN BAD PORTUGUESE.
NOS... ESTAMOS...ER... SOMOS DONOS DESTE TERRA...
THE PRONOUNCEMENT WAS MET WITH THE SAME BLANK LOOKS AS LOCKE'S PERFORMANCE.
STUMPF TRIED AGAIN, REARRANGING HIS INADEQUATE VOCABULARY TO TRY AND AWAKE A FLICKER OF UNDERSTANDING AMONGST THESE SAVAGES.
THE BOY STARED AT THE THIRD DEMON. HE WAS SICK AND HAGGARD: HE SMELT OF DEATH.

IF THEY DID UNDERSTAND, AND WERE FAKING BLANK INCOMPREHENSION, IT WAS A FLAWLESS PERFORMANCE.
THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND ME.
TELL THEM AGAIN.
I DON'T THINK THEY SPEAK PORTUGUESE.
TELL THEM ANYWAY.

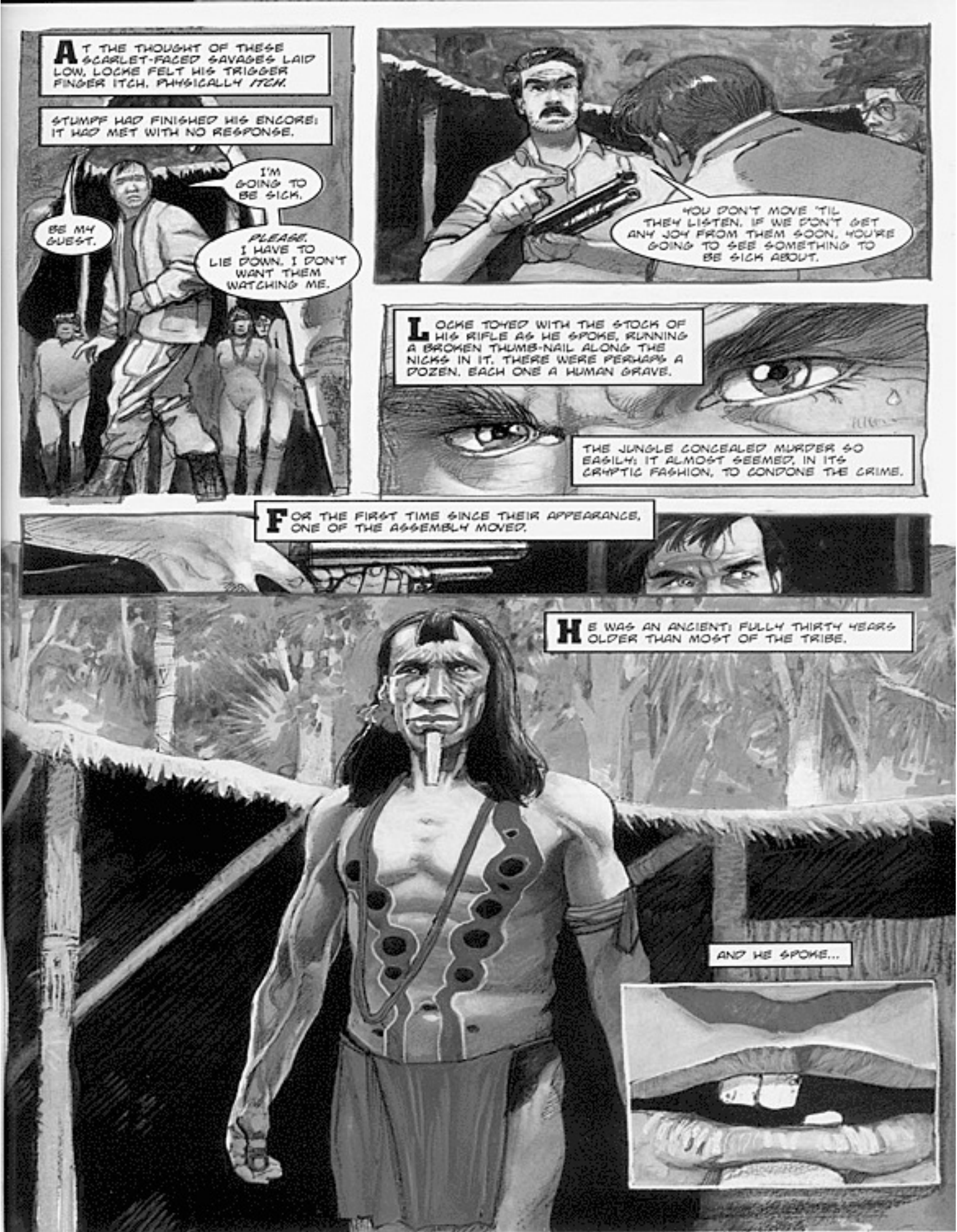
WE DON'T HAVE TO TALK TO THEM. THEY'RE ON OUR LAND. WE'RE WITHIN OUR RIGHTS--
NO. THERE'S NO NEED FOR SHOOTING. NOT IF WE CAN PERSUADE THEM TO GO PEACEFULLY.
THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND PLAIN COMMON SENSE. LOOK AT THEM. THEY'RE ANIMALS, LIVING IN FILTH.

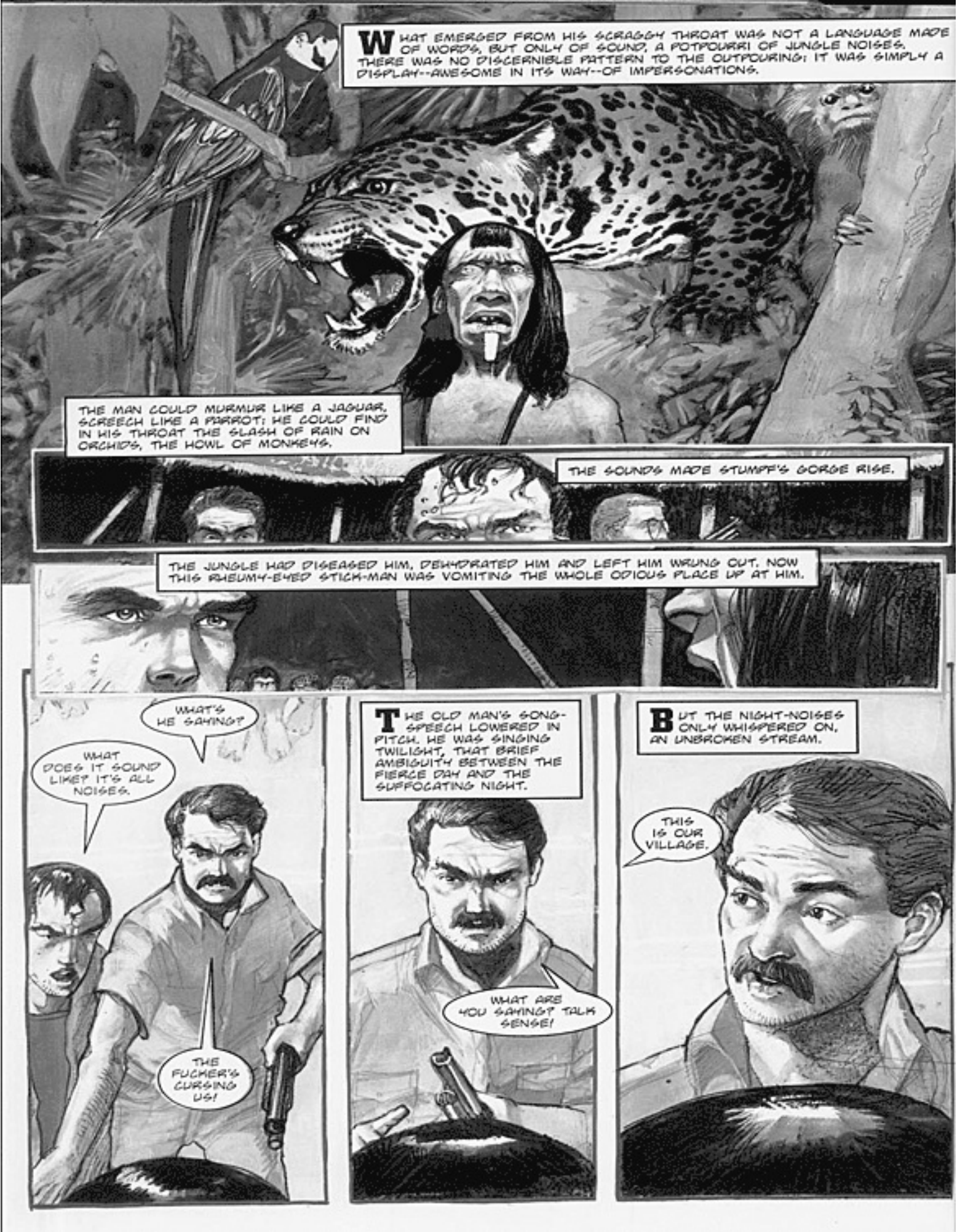
TELL THEM WE'VE GOT WORK TO DO HERE, THAT WE'VE GOT PAPERS.
I DON'T THINK THEY'D BE MUCH IMPRESSED.
JUST TELL THEM TO MOVE ON. FIND SOME OTHER PIECE OF LAND TO SQUAT ON.


WATCHING STUMPF PUT THESE SENTIMENTS INTO WORD AND SIGN LANGUAGE, LOCKE WAS ALREADY RUNNING THROUGH THE ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS AVAILABLE. EITHER THE INDIANS ACCEPTED THEIR DEMANDS AND MOVED ON, OR ELSE THEY WOULD HAVE TO ENFORCE THE EDICT.
AS CHERRICK HAD SAID, THEY WERE WITHIN THEIR RIGHTS.

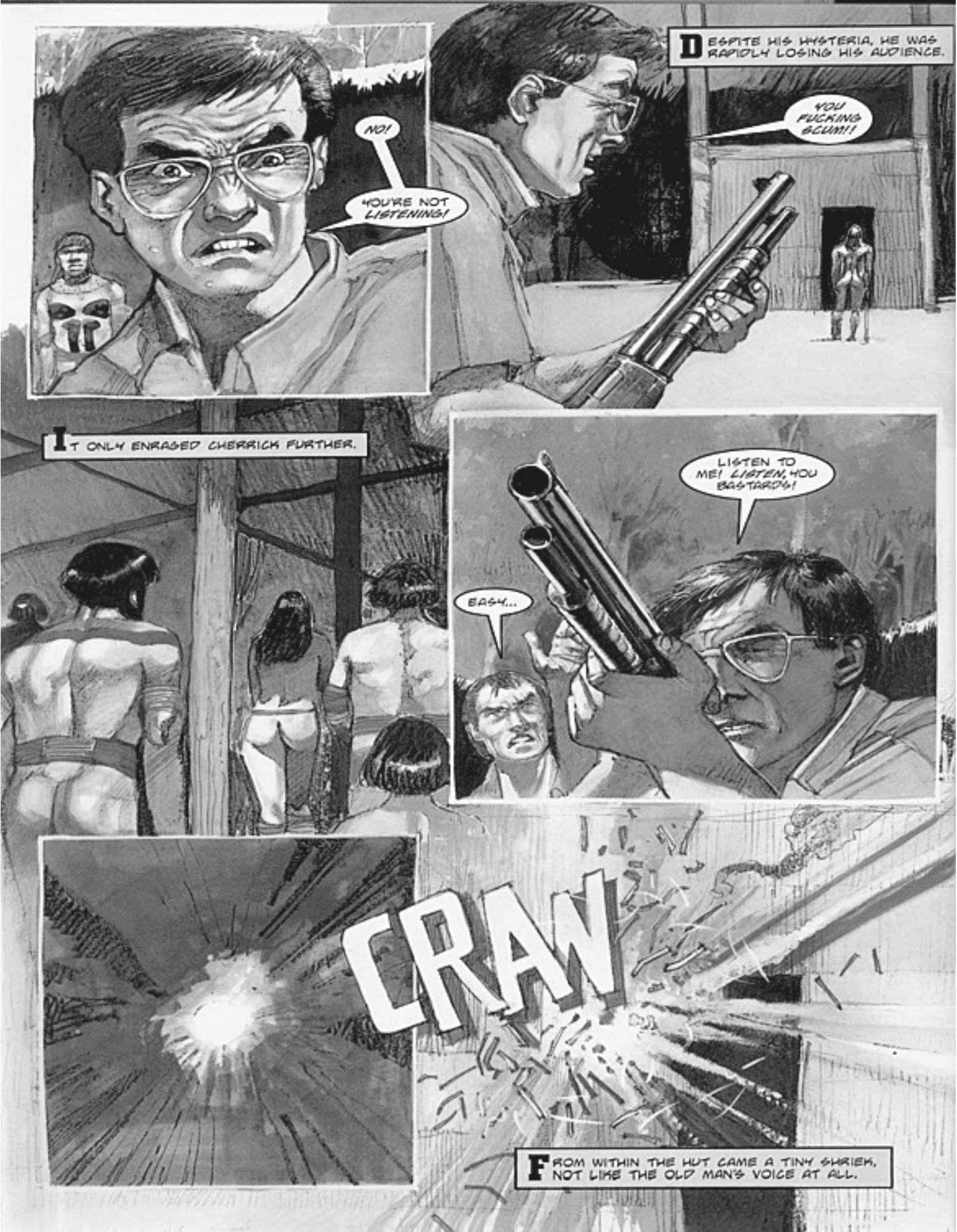
LOCKE HAD NO ACTIVE DESIRE TO SHED BLOOD. THE WORLD WAS TOO FULL OF BLEEDING HEART LIBERALS AND DOE-EYED SENTIMENTALISTS TO MAKE GENOCIDE THE MOST CONVENIENT SOLUTION.
BUT THE GUN HAD BEEN USED BEFORE, AND WOULD BE USED AGAIN, UNTIL EVERY UNWASHED INDIAN HAD PUT ON A PAIR OF TROUSERS AND GIVEN UP EATING MONKEYS.

INDEED, THE DIN OF LIBERALS NOTWITHSTANDING, THE GUN HAD ITS APPEAL. IT WAS SWIFT AND ABSOLUTE.


AT THE THOUGHT OF THESE SCARLET-FACED SAVAGES LAID LOW, LOCKE FELT HIS TRIGGER FINGER ITCH. PHYSICALLY ITCH.
STUMPF HAD FINISHED HIS ENCORE: IT HAD MET WITH NO RESPONSE.
I'M GOING TO BE SICK.
BE MY GUEST.
PLEASE. I HAVE TO LIE DOWN. I DON'T WANT THEM WATCHING ME.
YOU DON'T MOVE 'TIL THEY LISTEN. IF WE DON'T GET ANY JOY FROM THEM SOON, YOU'RE GOING TO SEE SOMETHING TO BE SICK ABOUT.
LOCKE TOYED WITH THE STOCK OF HIS RIFLE AS HE SPOKE, RUNNING A BROKEN THUMB-NAIL ALONG THE NICKS IN IT. THERE WERE PERHAPS A DOZEN. EACH ONE A HUMAN GRAVE.
THE JUNGLE CONCEALED MURDER SO EASILY: IT ALMOST SEEMED, IN ITS CRYPTIC FASHION, TO CONDONE THE CRIME.
FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THEIR APPEARANCE, ONE OF THE ASSEMBLY MOVED.
HE WAS AN ANCIENT: FULLY THIRTY YEARS OLDER THAN MOST OF THE TRIBE.
AND HE SPOKE...


WHAT EMERGED FROM HIS SCRAGGY THROAT WAS NOT A LANGUAGE MADE OF WORDS, BUT ONLY OF SOUND, A POTPOURRI OF JUNGLE NOISES. THERE WAS NO DISCERNIBLE PATTERN TO THE OUTPOURING: IT WAS SIMPLY A DISPLAY--AWESOME IN ITS WAY--OF IMPERSONATIONS.
THE MAN COULD MURMUR LIKE A JAGUAR, SCREECH LIKE A PARROT: HE COULD FIND IN HIS THROAT THE SLASH OF RAIN ON ORCHIDS, THE HOWL OF MONKEYS.
THE SOUNDS MADE STUMPF'S GORGE RISE.
THE JUNGLE HAD DISEASED HIM, DEHYDRATED HIM AND LEFT HIM WRUNG OUT. NOW THIS RHEUMY-EYED STICK-MAN WAS VOMITING THE WHOLE ODIOUS PLACE UP AT HIM.
WHAT'S HE SAYING?
WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE? IT'S ALL NOISES.
THE FUCKER'S CURSING US!
THE OLD MAN'S SONG-SPEECH LOWERED IN PITCH. HE WAS SINGING TWILIGHT, THAT BRIEF AMBIGUITY BETWEEN THE FIERCE DAY AND THE SUFFOCATING NIGHT.
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? TALK SENSE!
BUT THE NIGHT-NOISES ONLY WHISPERED ON, AN UNBROKEN STREAM.
THIS IS OUR VILLAGE.

OUR VILLAGE. OUR LAND.
SOME.
YOU SPEAK ENGLISH.
WHY DIDN'T YOU ANSWER ME EARLIER?
NOT MY PLACE TO SPEAK. HE IS THE ELDER.
THE CHIEF, YOU MEAN?
THE CHIEF IS DEAD. ALL HIS FAMILY IS DEAD. THIS IS THE WISEST OF US--
THEN YOU TELL HIM--
NO NEED TO TELL. HE UNDERSTANDS YOU.
HE SPEAKS ENGLISH TOO?
NO. YOU ARE... TRANSPARENT.
TELL HIM ANYWAY. TELL THEM ALL. THIS IS OUR LAND. WE BOUGHT IT.
THE TRIBE HAS ALWAYS LIVED HERE.
NOT ANY LONGER.
WE'VE GOT PAPERS... FROM THE GOVERN-MENT.
WE WERE HERE BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT.
THEN, LIKE THE CLOSING OF A DEPARTING DAY, THE OLD MAN STOPPED TALKING THE FOREST.
HEY!
CALL HIM BACK! MAKE HIM TELL THE REST THEY'VE GOT TO GO.
AROUND THE COMPOUND, OTHERS WERE ALSO TURNING AWAY. THE OLD MAN'S WITHDRAWAL APPARENTLY SIGNALLED THAT THE SHOW WAS OVER.


NO!
YOU'RE NOT LISTENING!
DESPITE HIS HYSTERIA, HE WAS RAPIDLY LOSING HIS AUDIENCE.
YOU FUCKING SCUM!!
IT ONLY ENRAGED CHERRICK FURTHER.
LISTEN TO ME! LISTEN, YOU BASTARDS!
EASY...
CRAW
FROM WITHIN THE HUT CAME A TINY SHRIEK, NOT LIKE THE OLD MAN'S VOICE AT ALL.

AS THE SHRIEK SOUNDED, STUMPF FELL TO HIS KNEES, HIS GUT IN SPASM. HE DID NOT SEE THE DIMINUTIVE FIGURE EMERGE FROM THE HUT AND TOTTER INTO THE SUNLIGHT.

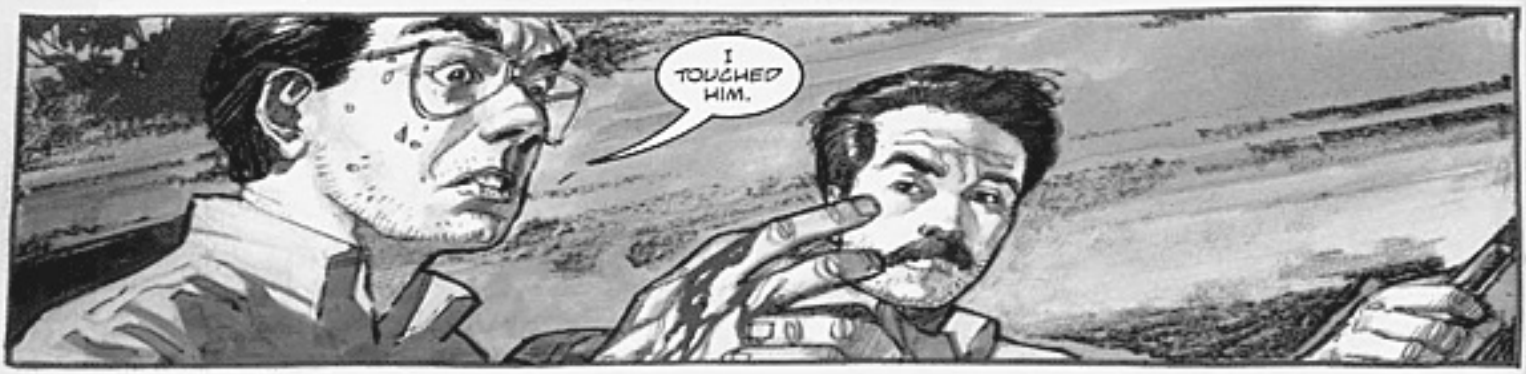
WHEN HE DID LOOK UP, AND SAW HOW THE CHILD WITH THE SCARLET FACE CLUTCHED HIS BELLY, STUMPF HOPED HIS EYES LIED.

BUT THEY DID NOT LIE.

SOMEWHERE AMONGST THE HUTS A WOMAN BEGAN TO SOB QUIETLY. FOR A MOMENT THE WORLD SPUN ON A PIN-HEAD, BALANCED EXQUISITELY BETWEEN SILENCE AND THE CRY THAT MUST BREAK IT, BETWEEN A TRUCE HELD AND THE COMING ATROCITY.

YOU STUPID BASTARD! BACK OFF! GET UP, STUMPF, WE'RE NOT WAITING.
COME NOW OR DON'T COME AT ALL!
HELP ME.
COVER US, CHERRICK!
LOCKE AND STUMPF WERE ALREADY WITHIN TWENTY FEET OF THE JEEP, AND THERE WAS STILL NO MOVE FROM THE SAVAGES.
THEN, AS HE LOOKED BACK TOWARDS THE COMPOUND, IT SEEMED AS THOUGH THE TRIBE BREATHED TOGETHER ONE SOLID BREATH...
...AND HEARING THAT SOUND, CHERRICK FELT DEATH WEDGE ITSELF LIKE A FISH-BONE IN HIS THROAT, TOO DEEP TO BE PLUCKED OUT BY HIS FINGERS, TOO BIG TO BE SHAT.
IT WAS JUST WAITING THERE, LODGED IN CHERRICK'S ANATOMY, BEYOND ARGUMENT OR APPEAL.

HAD HE TOUCHED THE BOY? IF SO, IT HAD BEEN AN ASTONISHING SLEIGHT-OF-HAND, FOR CHERRICK HAD SEEN NOTHING.
TRICK OR NO TRICK, THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISPLAY WAS PERFECTLY APPARENT: HE WAS BEING ACCUSED OF MURDER.
AS HE SPOKE HE SEEMED TO SEE A SHIFTING IN THE OLD MAN'S FEATURES.
"YOU DON'T FRIGHTEN ME, YOU UNDERSTAND? I'M NOT A FOOL.
BENEATH THE CORRUPTION OF AGE, A HINT OF THE CHILD NOW DEAD AT THE HUT DOOR: THE TINY MOUTH EVEN SEEMED TO SMILE.
THEN, AS SUBTLY AS IT APPEARED, THE ILLUSION FADED.
AND CHERRICK WITHDREW.



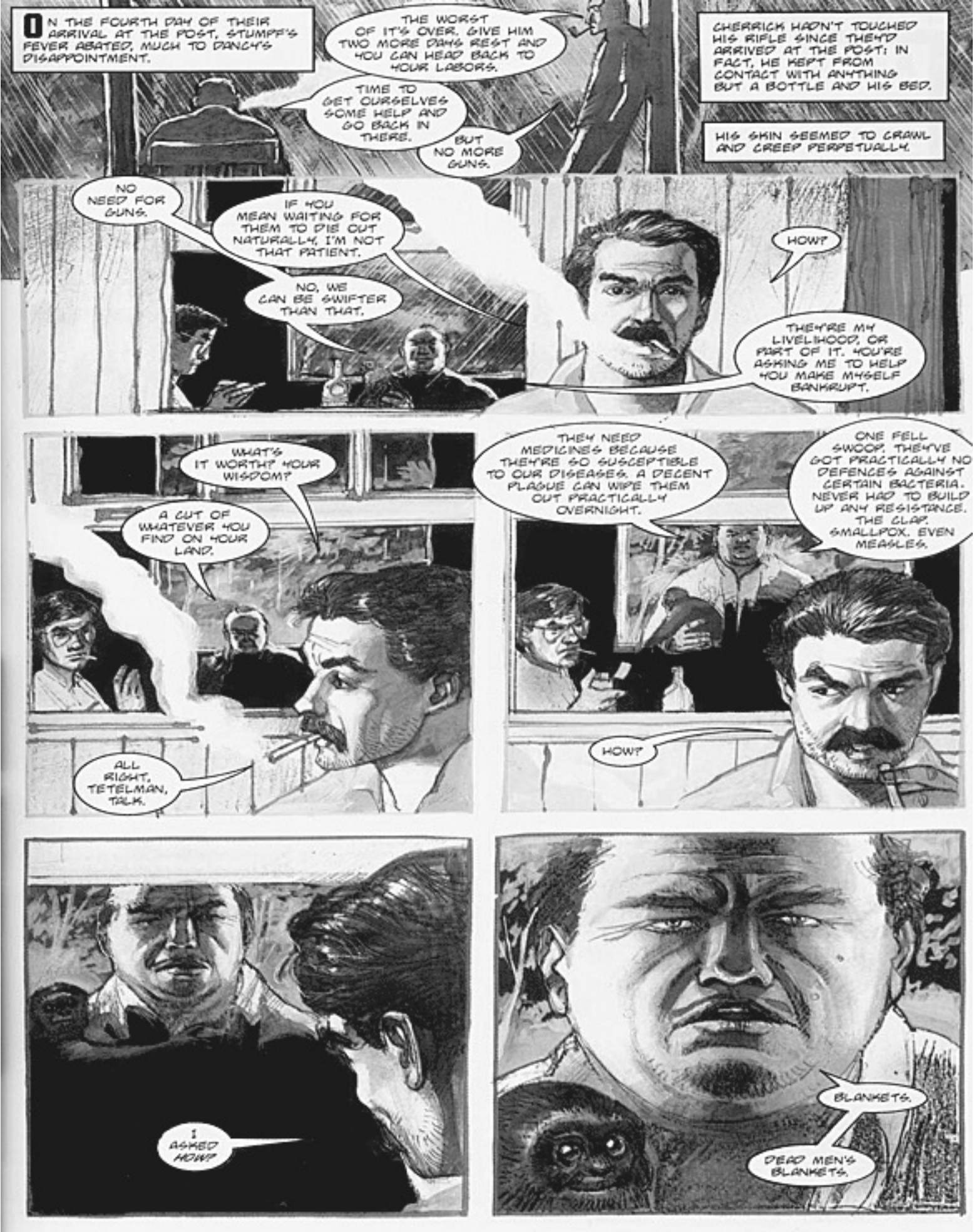
THE TINY TRADING POST TO THE SOUTH OF AVERIO WAS SCANT OF CIVILISATION, BUT IT SUFFICED. THERE WERE WHITE FACES HERE, AND CLEAN WATER. STUMPF, WHOSE CONDITION HAD DETERIORATED ON THE RETURN JOURNEY, WAS TREATED BY DANCY, AN ENGLISHMAN WHO HAD THE MANNER OF A DISENFRANCHISED EARL AND A FACE LIKE A HAMMERED STEAK.

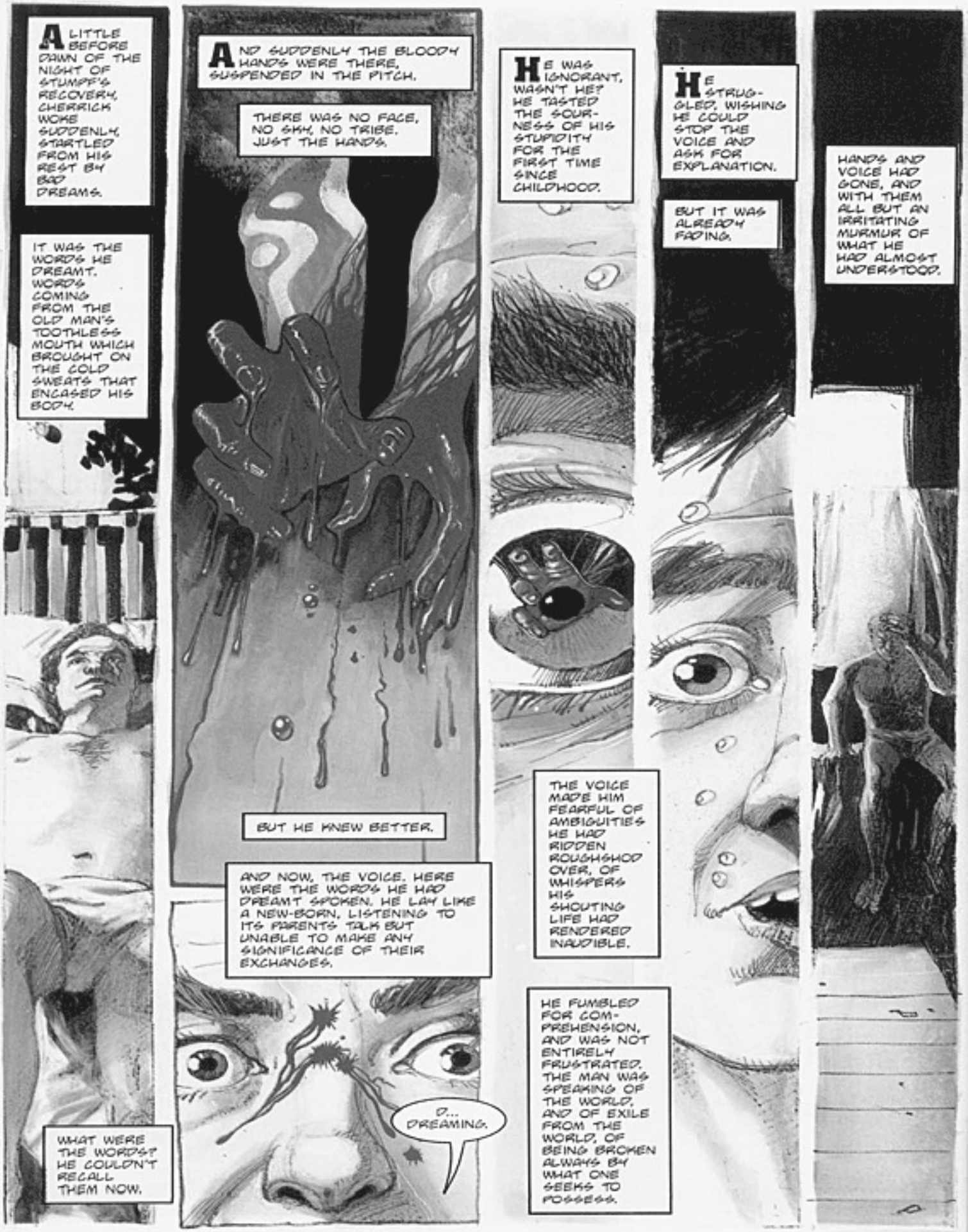
IT WAS TETELMAN, THE OWNER OF THE TRADING POST'S STORES, WHO HAD THE MOST TO SAY WHEN THE REPORT WAS FINISHED.

GUYANA STOL
I'VE BEEN HERE YEARS. I KNOW THE WAY THESE PEOPLE THINK. THEY MAY ACT AS THOUGH THEY'RE STUPID-- COWARDS EVEN. TAKE IT FROM ME, THEY'RE NEITHER.

THEY DIDN'T MOVE ON US EVEN THOUGH THEY OUTNUMBERED US TEN TO ONE. IF THAT ISN'T COWARDICE, WHAT IS IT?
THIRTY YEARS AGO THIS WHOLE TERRITORY WAS THEIR HOMELAND. NOBODY WANTED IT. THEY WENT WHERE THEY LIKED, DID WHAT THEY LIKED. AS FAR AS THE WHITES WERE CONCERNED, THE JUNGLE WAS FILTHY AND DISEASE-INFECTED. WE WANTED NO PART OF IT.
AND, OF COURSE, IN SOME WAYS WE WERE RIGHT. IT IS FILTHY AND DISEASE-INFECTED! BUT IT'S ALSO GOT RESERVES WE NOW WANT BADLY! MINERALS, OIL MAYBE...POWER.
WE PAID FOR THE LAND. IT'S ALL WE'VE GOT NOW.
PAID?
THE MONKEY CHATTERED, APPARENTLY AS AMUSED BY THIS CLAIM AS ITS MASTER.
NO, YOU JUST PAID FOR A BLIND EYE, SO YOU COULD TAKE IT BY FORCE. YOU PAID FOR THE RIGHT TO FUCK UP THE INDIANS IN ANY WAY YOU COULD. THAT'S WHAT YOUR DOLLARS BOUGHT, MISTER LOCKE. THE GOVERNMENT OF THIS COUNTRY IS COUNTING OFF THE MONTHS UNTIL EVERY TRIBE ON THE SUB-CONTINENT IS WIPED OUT BY YOU OR YOUR LIKE.
SO WHY'D YOU COME HERE, IF YOU'RE SO FUCKING CLEVER?
SAME REASON AS YOU.
WHAT REASON IS THAT?
GREED.
I THOUGHT I COULD MAKE MY FORTUNE OUT HERE, THE SAME WAY YOU DO...I GAVE MYSELF TWO YEARS, THREE AT THE MOST. THAT WAS THE BEST PART OF TWO DECADES AGO.
THE JUNGLE EATS YOU UP AND SPITS YOU OUT, SOONER OR LATER.
NOT ME.
EXTINCTION'S IN THE AIR, MISTER LOCKE, I CAN SMELL IT.
THEY WON'T COME HERE, WILL THEY? THEY WON'T FOLLOW US?
THE QUESTION, SPOKEN IN ONLY A WHISPER, BEGGED FOR A REPLY IN THE NEGATIVE.
TRY AS HE MIGHT, CHERRICK COULD NOT DISLODGE THE SIGHTS OF THE PREVIOUS DAY.

DON'T FRET. SOMETIMES ONE OR TWO OF THEM WILL DRIFT IN HERE WITH A PARROT TO SELL, OR A FEW POTS, BUT I'VE NEVER SEEN THEM COME HERE IN ANY NUMBERS. THEY DON'T LIKE IT. THIS IS CIVILISATION AS FAR AS THEY'RE CONCERNED, AND IT INTIMIDATES THEM. BESIDES, THEY WOULDN'T HARM MY GUESTS. THEY NEED ME.
NEED YOU?
THEY USE OUR MEDICINES. PANCH SUPPLIES THEM. AND BLANKETS, ONCE IN A WHILE. AS I SAID, THEY'RE NOT STUPID.
YAAAH
YOUR FRIEND'S GONE BAD.
NO FRIEND.
NEXT DOOR STUMPF HAD BEGUN TO HOWL. PANCH'S CONSOLING VOICE COULD BE HEARD, ATTEMPTING TO TALK DOWN THE PANIC. HE WAS PLAINLY FAILING.
IT ROTS.
AARRG!
WHAT DOES?
THE SOUL. IT'S LIKE FRUIT, YOU SEE. IT ROTS.
STUMPF'S CRIES GAVE FORCE TO THE OBSERVATION. IT WAS NOT THE VOICE OF A WHOLESOME CREATURE; THERE WAS PUTRESCENCE IN IT.
WHAT DO THEY GIVE YOU FOR THE MEDICINES AND BLANKETS? WOMEN?
I'VE NO USE FOR WOMEN. I'VE HAD THE SMPH FOR TOO MANY YEARS. THE SOUL...ISN'T THE ONLY THING THAT ROTS.
WELL, WHAT DO YOU GET FROM THEM THEN? FOR YOUR SUPPLIES?
THE WORD HAD A SEDUCTIVE RING: IT SOUNDED LIKE LIFE TO HIM.
EXTINCT?
ARTIFACTS, BOWLS, JUGS, MATS. EVERYBODY WANTS SOMETHING MADE BY AN EXTINCT TRIBE THESE DAYS. MEMENTO MORI.
OH, CERTAINLY. THEY'RE AS GOOD AS GONE. IF YOU DON'T WIPE THEM OUT, THEY'LL DO IT THEMSELVES.
SUICIDE?
IN THEIR FASHION. A TRIBE LOSES ITS LAND, AND ITS APPETITE FOR LIFE GOES WITH IT. THE WOMEN DON'T GET PREGNANT ANYMORE; THE YOUNG MEN TAKE TO DRINK, THE OLD MEN JUST STARVE THEMSELVES TO DEATH. IN A YEAR OR TWO IT'S LIKE THEY NEVER EXISTED.
LOCKE SILENTLY SALUTED THE FATAL WISDOM OF THESE PEOPLE. THEY KNEW WHEN TO DIE, WHICH WAS MORE THAN COULD BE SAID FOR SOME HE'D MET. THE THOUGHT OF THEIR DEATH-WISH ABSOLVED HIM OF ANY LAST VESTIGES OF GUILT.
WHAT WAS THE GUN IN HIS HAND, EXCEPT AN INSTRUMENT OF EVOLUTION?


ON THE FOURTH DAY OF THEIR ARRIVAL AT THE POST, STUMPF'S FEVER ABATED, MUCH TO DANCY'S DISAPPOINTMENT.
THE WORST OF IT'S OVER. GIVE HIM TWO MORE DAYS REST AND YOU CAN HEAD BACK TO YOUR LABORS.
TIME TO GET OURSELVES SOME HELP AND GO BACK IN THERE.
BUT NO MORE GUNS.
CHERRICK HADN'T TOUCHED HIS RIFLE SINCE THEY'D ARRIVED AT THE POST: IN FACT, HE KEPT FROM CONTACT WITH ANYTHING BUT A BOTTLE AND HIS BED.
HIS SKIN SEEMED TO CRAWL AND CREEP PERPETUALLY.
NO NEED FOR GUNS.
IF YOU MEAN WAITING FOR THEM TO DIE OUT NATURALLY, I'M NOT THAT PATIENT.
NO, WE CAN BE SWIFTER THAN THAT.
HOW?
THEY'RE MY LIVELIHOOD, OR PART OF IT. YOU'RE ASKING ME TO HELP YOU MAKE MYSELF BANKRUPT.
WHAT'S IT WORTH? YOUR WISDOM?
A CUT OF WHATEVER YOU FIND ON YOUR LAND.
ALL RIGHT, TETELMAN, TALK.
THEY NEED MEDICINES BECAUSE THEY'RE SO SUSCEPTIBLE TO OUR DISEASES. A DECENT PLAGUE CAN WIPE THEM OUT PRACTICALLY OVERNIGHT.
ONE FELL SWOOP. THEY'VE GOT PRACTICALLY NO DEFENCES AGAINST CERTAIN BACTERIA. NEVER HAD TO BUILD UP ANY RESISTANCE. THE CLAP. SMALLPOX. EVEN MEASLES.
HOW?
I ASKED HOW?
BLANKETS.
DEAD MEN'S BLANKETS.


A LITTLE BEFORE DAWN OF THE NIGHT OF STUMPF'S RECOVERY, CHERRICK WOKE SUDDENLY, STARTLED FROM HIS REST BY BAD DREAMS.
IT WAS THE WORDS HE DREAMT. WORDS COMING FROM THE OLD MAN'S TOOTHLESS MOUTH WHICH BROUGHT ON THE COLD SWEATS THAT ENCASED HIS BODY.
WHAT WERE THE WORDS? HE COULDN'T RECALL THEM NOW.
AND SUDDENLY THE BLOODY HANDS WERE THERE, SUSPENDED IN THE PITCH.
THERE WAS NO FACE, NO SKY, NO TRIBE. JUST THE HANDS.
BUT HE KNEW BETTER.
AND NOW, THE VOICE. HERE WERE THE WORDS HE HAD DREAMT SPOKEN. HE LAY LIKE A NEW-BORN, LISTENING TO ITS PARENTS TALK BUT UNABLE TO MAKE ANY SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR EXCHANGES.
O... DREAMING.
HE WAS IGNORANT, WASN'T HE? HE TASTED THE SOURNESS OF HIS STUPIDITY FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE CHILDHOOD.
THE VOICE MADE HIM FEARFUL OF AMBIGUITIES HE HAD RIDDEN ROUGHSHOD OVER, OF WHISPERS HIS SHOUTING LIFE HAD RENDERED INAUDIBLE.
HE FUMBLED FOR COMPREHENSION, AND WAS NOT ENTIRELY FRUSTRATED. THE MAN WAS SPEAKING OF THE WORLD, AND OF EXILE FROM THE WORLD, OF BEING BROKEN ALWAYS BY WHAT ONE SEEKS TO POSSESS.
HE STRUGGLED, WISHING HE COULD STOP THE VOICE AND ASK FOR EXPLANATION.
BUT IT WAS ALREADY FADING.
HANDS AND VOICE HAD GONE, AND WITH THEM ALL BUT AN IRRITATING MURMUR OF WHAT HE HAD ALMOST UNDERSTOOD.

His back and buttocks, and the underside of his thighs, felt sore.
There was again the itch of tenderness in his skin that he'd suffered since coming to the post. He wanted to be away from this place, and badly.
There was a cut in the cushion of his thumb, where the mosquito net had nicked his flesh.
The clothes he put on were a scourge to his back. He seemed to feel every thread chafing his nerve endings.
He felt strange. There was something about this dawning day which made him profoundly uneasy. He knew the dangers of courting unfounded fears, and he tried to forbid them, but they were incontestable.
FIP
BZZZZZZZZZZZ
It wasn't the blood of the insect, but his own.

STUMPF'S NOT FIT FOR THIS KIND OF WORK, AND CHERRICK--
WHAT ABOUT ME?
YOU'RE PARANOID, PARANOID AND UNRELIABLE.
JUST BECAUSE I KILLED SOME INDIAN BRAT!
YOU JUST DIDN'T HAVE THE BALLS TO DO IT YOURSELF!
ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?
AAAGH!
THUMP!
THROUGH THE DIN OF PAIN IN HIS HEAD HE COULD HEAR A QUIET VOICE. THE WORDS WERE INAUDIBLE, BUT HE KNEW WHOSE THEY WERE.
I WON'T HEAR!
I WON'T HEAR, DAMN YOU!

WHAT THE HELL'S HE TALKING ABOUT?
HE SPOKE TO ME, THE OLD MAN.
YOU MEAN AT THE VILLAGE. IS THAT WHAT YOU MEAN?
HE WANTS US OUT. EXILES, LIKE THEM. LIKE THEM!
I BELIEVE YOU. JUST SLOW DOWN. WE CAN SORT IT OUT.
NO. IT'S PUSHING US OUT. EVERYTHING WE TOUCH. EVERYTHING WE TOUCH...
WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?
LET ME HELP.
NO DON'T TOUCH ME!
IT'S ALL RIGHT.
IT WASN'T. DANCY FELT THE FLESH SLIP AWAY FROM THE BONE. THE SENSATION BESTED EVEN HIS TASTE FOR AGONY.
HE'S ROTTING...
THERE WAS NO HELP FOR HIM. ALL THE OTHERS COULD DO WAS STAND AROUND LIKE SPECTATORS AT AN EXECUTION, AWAITING THE FINAL THROES.

IS HE DEAD?
ALMOST.
ROTTED.

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?

YOU WANT TO GIVE ME YOUR SHARE OF THE LAND?
THERE'S WITNESSES HERE. JUST SAY YES. THEY'LL HEAR YOU. JUST SAY YES.
DANCH, YOU HEAR WHAT HE SAID?

DEEP IN HIS BODY, CHERRICK FELT THE FISH-BONE HED FIRST CHOKED ON IN THE VILLAGE TWIST ITSELF ABOUT ONE FINAL TIME, AND EXTINGUISH HIM.
DANCH, YOU'RE A WITNESS.
IF YOU MUST.

DID HE SAY YES, DANCH?
HE SAID YES.
HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE DEAD MAN HAD SAID, BUT WHAT DID IT MATTER? LOCKE WOULD HAVE THE LAND ANYWAY, WOULDN'T HE?

THEY HAD BURIED HIM TOWARD'S EVENING. THE CORPSE HAD BEGUN TO PUTREFY BY THE TIME IT WAS SEWN UP IN CANVAS FOR THE BURIAL.

THE NIGHT FOLLOWING, STUMPF HAD COME TO LOCKE AND OFFERED HIM THE LAST THIRD OF THE TERRITORY TO ADD TO CHERRICK'S SHARE.

LOCKE, EVER THE REALIST, HAD ACCEPTED.

THE EVENING OF THE NEXT DAY, AS STUMPF HAD HOPED, THE SUPPLY PLANE CAME IN.

LOCKE ELECTED TO FLY BACK TO SANTAREM TO BUY UP FRESH SUPPLIES AND, IF POSSIBLE, HIRE A RELIABLE DRIVER AND GUNMAN.

AT SANTAREM, THEY PARTED WITH A SINGLE HANDSHAKE WHICH LEFT EVERY NERVE IN STUMPF'S HAND SCOURGED...

...AN OPEN CUT IN THE TENDER FLESH BETWEN HIS INDEX FINGER AND THUMB.

SANTAREM WASN'T RIO, LOCKE MUSED, AS HE MADE HIS WAY DOWN TO A BAR AT THE SOUTH END OF TOWN, IN SEARCH OF THE KIND OF LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT OF WHICH HE NEVER TIRED.

THE WOMEN OF SANTAREM WERE AS UNPALATABLE AS THE BEER, BUT LOCKE HAD NO EYE FOR BEAUTY IN THE OPPOSITE SEX: HIS PLEASURE WAS IN SEEING JUST WHAT A WOMAN WOULD DO FOR A FEW GRUBBY DOLLAR BILLS.

HE HAD FINALLY FOUND ONE WHO--ONCE DRUNKENNESS HAD PERSUADED HER TO ABANDON WHAT LITTLE HOPE OF DIGNITY SHE HAD--WAS WILLING TO ACCEDE TO A PARTICULAR PECCADILLO...

FUCK.

SI, FOOK, FOOK.

WHO IS IT?

MENSAGEM, SENHOR LOCKE. URGENTE. URGENTE.

MENSAGEM, SENHOR LOCKE. HOSPITAL SACRADO CORAÇÃO DE MARIA.
IT COULD ONLY BE STUMPF, LOCKE THOUGHT. WHO ELSE DID HE KNOW IN THIS CORNER OF HELL WHOD CALL UPON HIM?
VEM COMIGO. VEM COMIGO. URGENTE.

NO, I'M NOT COMING. NOT NOW. YOU UNDERSTAND? LATER. LATER.
TA MORRENDO.
DYING? WELL, LET HIM. UNDERSTAND ME? YOU GO BACK AND TELL HIM I WON'T COME UNTIL I'M READY.

E MEU DINHEIRO?
YOU GO TO HELL.
WHEN, TWO HOURS AND ONE UNGAINLY ACT OF PASSIONLESS SEX LATER, LOCKE UNLOCKED THE DOOR, HE DISCOVERED THAT THE CHILD, BY WAY OF REVENGE, HAD DEFECATED ON THE THRESHOLD.

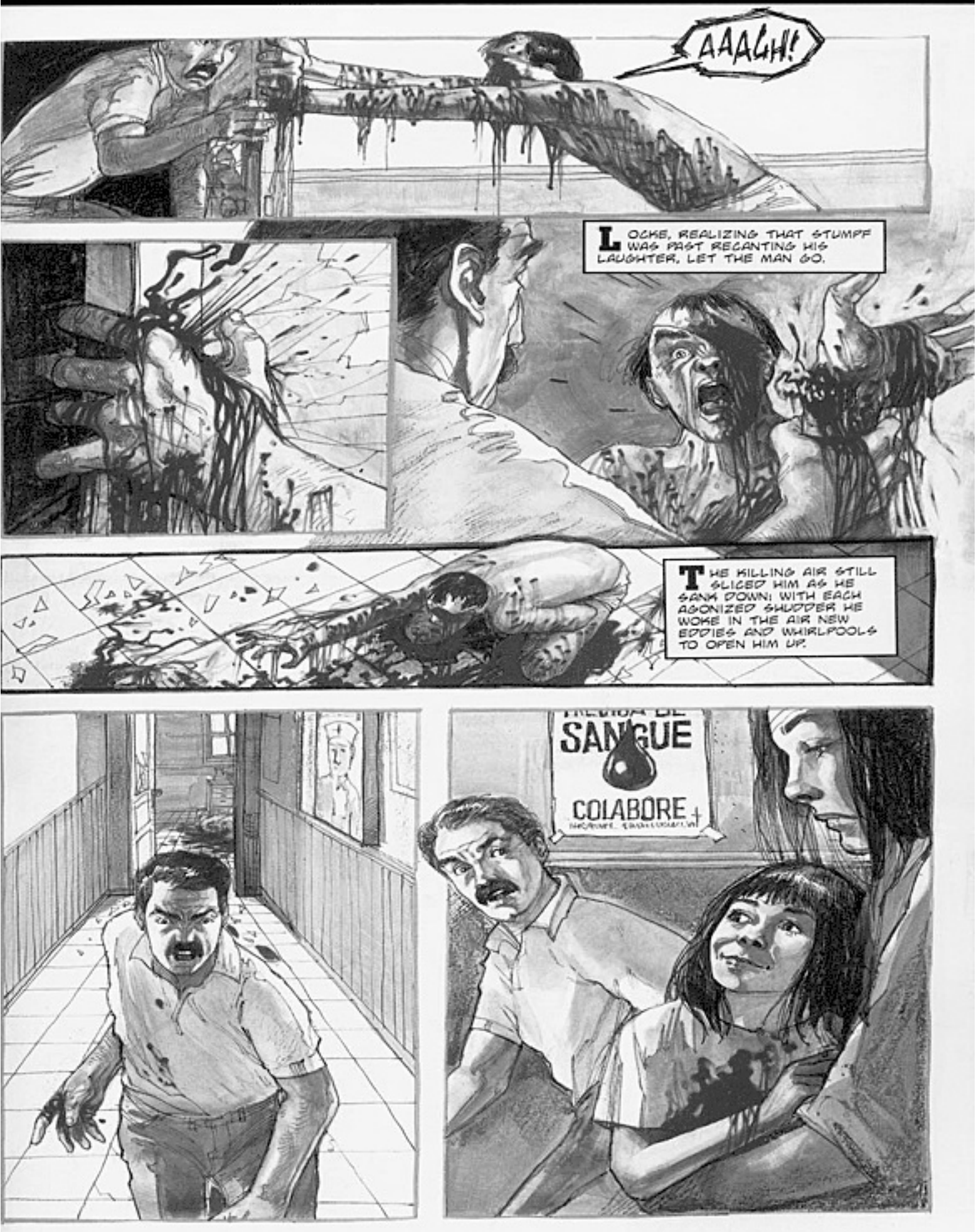
THE HOSPITAL SACRADO CORAÇÃO DE MARIA WAS NO PLACE TO FALL ILL! BETTER, THOUGHT LOCKE, TO DIE IN YOUR OWN BED WITH YOUR OWN SWEAT FOR COMPANY.
HERE, YOUR FRIEND. HE'S HURT HIS EYE, AND HE HAS SOME MINOR ABRASIONS ON HIS HANDS AND FACE, BUT HE WON'T HAVE ANYONE GO NEAR HIM.
JUST PAYS FOR THE CLEAN ROOM AND DOCTORS HIMSELF.
HE HAS DELUSIONS. TELL HIM HE PAY MORE OR TOMORROW HE LEAVES.

LOCKE WAS LOOKING AT THE MAN FOR A GOOD TIME BEFORE STUMPF SENSED THAT HE WAS WATCHED. HE LOOKED UP SLOWLY.
HIS GOOD EYE, AS IF IN COMPENSATION FOR THE LOSS OF ITS COMPANION, SEEMED TO HAVE SWELLED TO TWICE ITS NATURAL SIZE. IT HELD ENOUGH FEAR FOR BOTH IT AND ITS TWIN: INDEED ENOUGH FOR A DOZEN EYES.

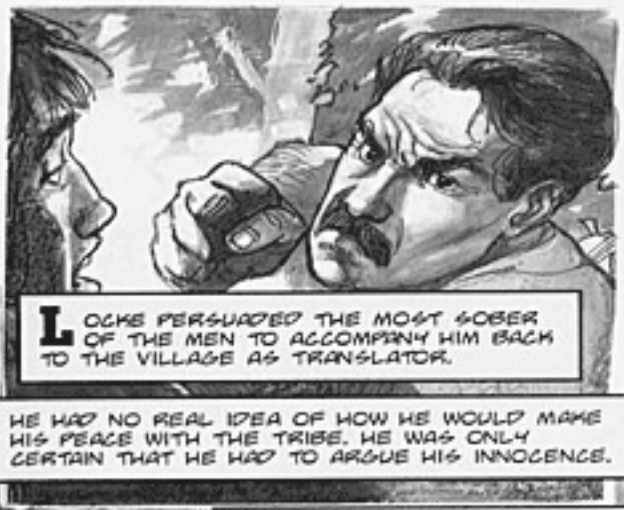
EVERYTHING IS TRUE, LOCKE. EVERYTHING.
WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
TETELMAN TOLD ME--CHERRICK'S BABBLING, ABOUT BEING EXILES...*THE ELDER*. FROM THE VILLAGE. *HE WAS HERE*, STANDING WHERE YOU'RE STANDING, LOOKING AT ME THROUGH THE GLASS.

IT HAPPENED TO CHERRICK, AND NOW IT'S HAPPENING TO ME. NONE OF US'LL ESCAPE. NOT UNLESS WE MAKE AMENDS.
LOCK, YOU'VE GOT TO VACATE THE ROOM. I'VE BEEN TOLD YOU'VE GOT TO GET OUT BY MORNING.
NO, I CAN'T LEAVE. I CAN'T LEAVE.
THE DUST. THE DUST IN THE AIR. IT'LL CUT ME UP. I GOT A SPECK IN MY EYE--JUST A SPECK-- AND THE NEXT THING MY EYE'S BLEEDING AS THOUGH IT'LL NEVER STOP. I CAN'T HARDLY LIE DOWN. THE SHEET'S LIKE A BED OF NAILS. YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME.
HOW?
PAY THEM FOR THE ROOM. PAY THEM SO I CAN STAY 'TIL YOU GET A SPECIALIST FROM SAO LUIS. THEN GO BACK TO THE VILLAGE, LOCKE. GO BACK AND TELL THEM. I DON'T WANT THE LAND. TELL THEM I DON'T OWN IT ANY LONGER.
I'LL GO BACK, BUT IN MY OWN GOOD TIME.
TELL THEM TO LET ME BE. PLEASE.
THERE'S NOTHING THERE.
HE'S HERE.
MY GOD.
WHAT'S HAPPENING?
SEE?
WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING AT? YOU HAVEN'T GOT CHERRICK'S DISEASE. YOU CAN'T HAVE. YOU DIDN'T TOUCH THEM. WE AGREED, DAMN YOU. CHERRICK TOUCHED THEM-- WE DIDN'T.
WE WERE WRONG.
THIS ISN'T SOMETHING YOU CAN BEAT INTO SUBMISSION, LOCKE. IT'S OUT OF OUR HANDS.
SEE?

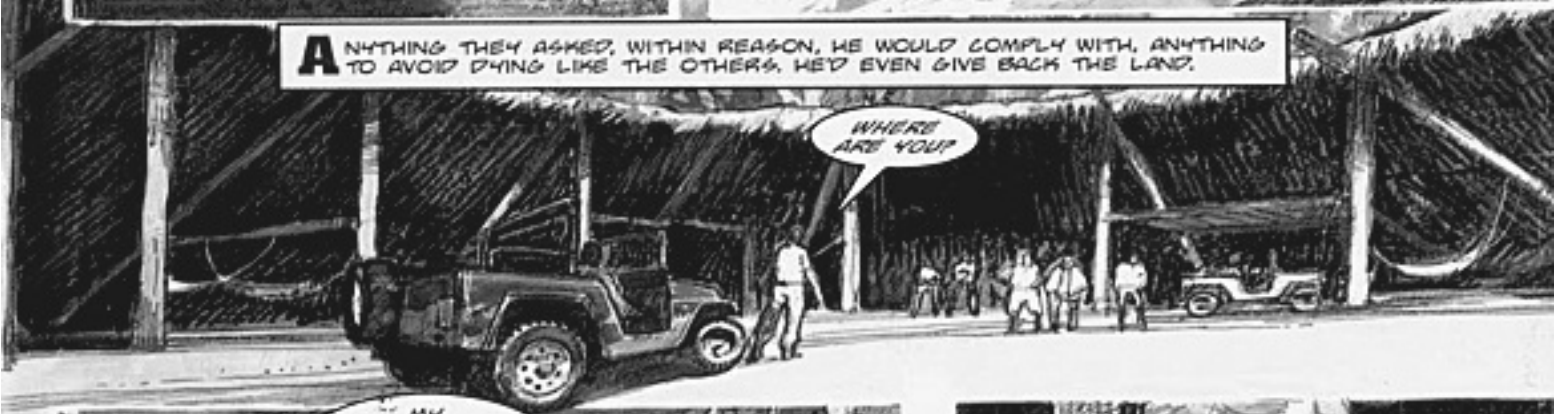
STUMPF'S SUDDEN, FATALISTIC CALM FRIGHTENED LOCKE.
THE ROOM WAS LOCKED. THE KEY WAS ON THE INSIDE, WHERE STUMPF HAD PAID FOR IT TO BE.
KEEP OUT. KEEP AWAY FROM ME.
KEEP OUT, I SAID! NO!
SOMEWHERE NEARBY A WOMAN BEGAN TO YELL. NO MATTER: LOCKE WOULD HAVE HIS HANDS ON THE GERMAN BEFORE HELP COULD COME...
...AND THEN, BY CHRIST, HE'D WIPE EVERY LAST VESTIGE OF A SMILE FROM THE BASTARD'S LIPS.
IN THE ANTISEPTIC COCOON OF HIS ROOM, STUMPF FELT THE FIRST BLAST OF UNCLEAN AIR FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD. IT WAS NO MORE THEN A LIGHT BREEZE THAT INVADED HIS MAKESHIFT SANCTUARY, BUT IT BORE UPON ITS BACK THE DEBRIS OF THE WORLD.
SOOT AND SEEDS, FLAKES OF SKIN ITCHED OFF A THOUSAND SCALPS, FLUFF AND SAND AND TWIST OF HAIR, THE BRIGHT DUST FROM A MOTH'S WING.
MOTES SO SMALL THE HUMAN EYE ONLY GLIMPSED THEM IN A SHAFT OF WHITE SUNLIGHT, EACH A TINY, WHIRLING SPECK QUITE HARMLESS TO MOST LIVING ORGANISMS.
AAIIEEEE!
BUT THIS CLOUD WAS LETHAL TO STUMPF: IN SECONDS HIS BODY BECAME A FIELD OF TINY, SEEPING WOUNDS.


AAAGH!
LOCKE, REALIZING THAT STUMPF WAS FAST RECANTING HIS LAUGHTER, LET THE MAN GO.
THE KILLING AIR STILL SLICED HIM AS HE SANK DOWN: WITH EACH AGONIZED SHUDDER HE WOKE IN THE AIR NEW EDDIES AND WHIRLPOOLS TO OPEN HIM UP.
SANGUE
COLABORE

THERE WAS NOBODY LOCKE KNEW AT TETELMAN'S STORE. THE HIRED HANDS WERE DRUNK, THEIR MASTERS HAVING GONE OFF INTO THE JUNGLE THE PREVIOUS DAY.


LOCKE PERSUADED THE MOST SOBER OF THE MEN TO ACCOMPANY HIM BACK TO THE VILLAGE AS TRANSLATOR.
HE HAD NO REAL IDEA OF HOW HE WOULD MAKE HIS PEACE WITH THE TRIBE. HE WAS ONLY CERTAIN THAT HE HAD TO ARGUE HIS INNOCENCE.

AFTER ALL, IT HADN'T BEEN *ME* WHO FIRED THE KILLING SHOT. HE HAD NOT HARMED THE PEOPLE IN ANY WAY.
IF THEY SHOULD REQUIRE SOME PENANCE OF HIM, HE WAS NOT ABOVE ACCEDING TO THEIR DEMANDS. HE HAD SEEN SO MUCH SUFFERING OF LATE. HE WANTED TO BE CLEANSED OF IT.

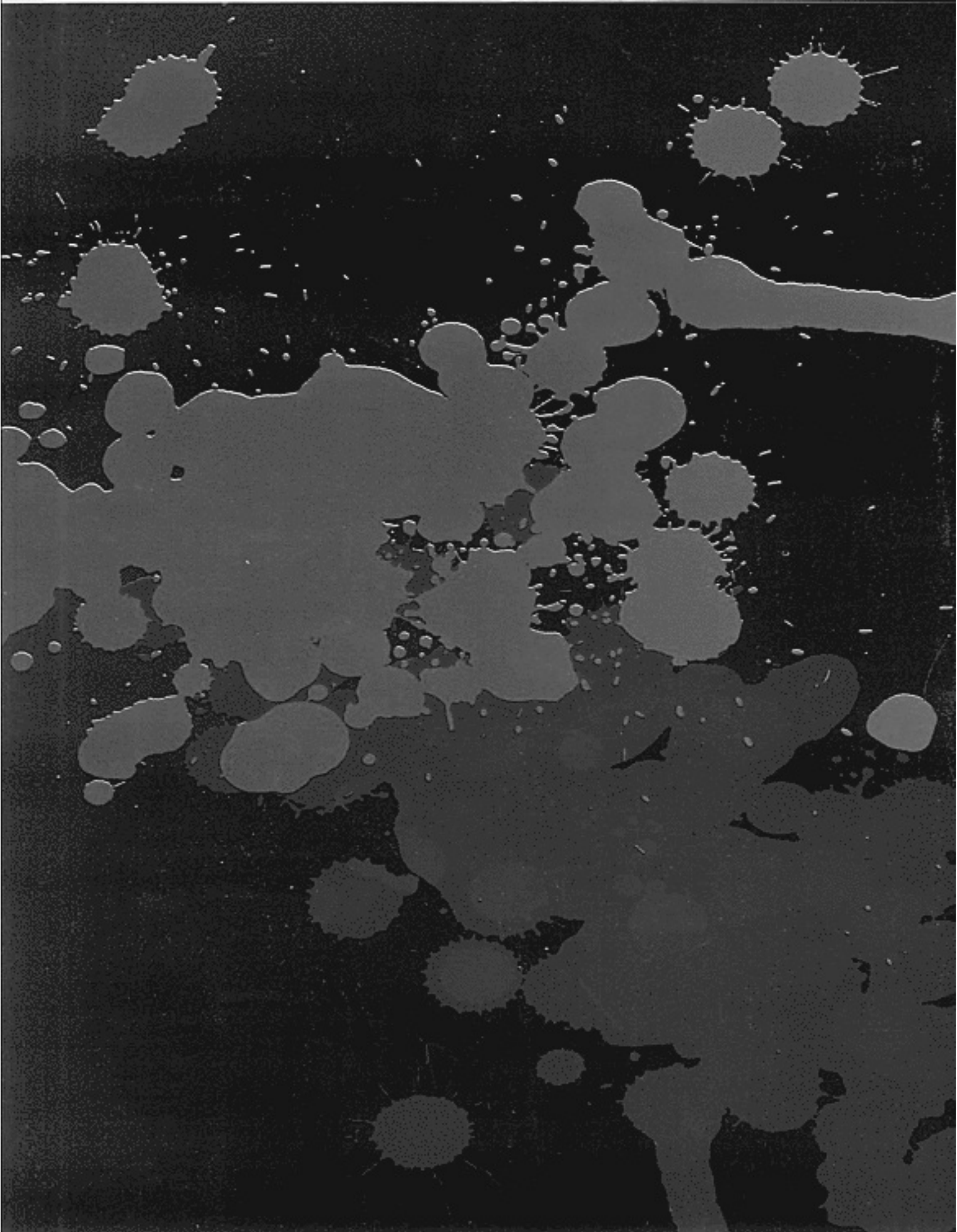

ANYTHING THEY ASKED, WITHIN REASON, HE WOULD COMPLY WITH, ANYTHING TO AVOID DYING LIKE THE OTHERS. HE'D EVEN GIVE BACK THE LAND.
WHERE ARE YOU?

MY GOD, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
I MIGHT ASK YOU THE SAME QUESTION.

MISTER LOCKE. IT IS GOOD WE MEET.

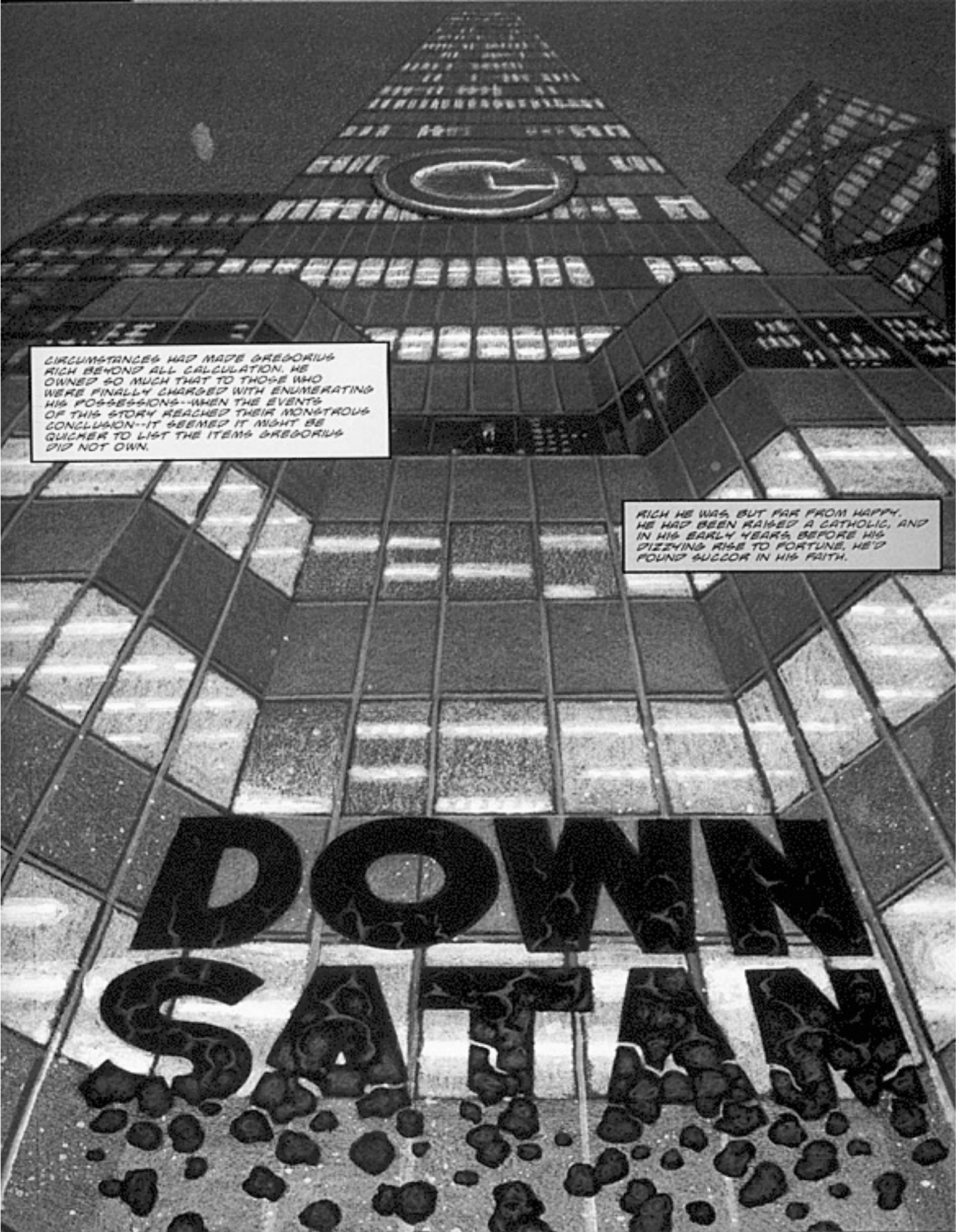
MY APOLOGIES. WE'VE BEEN WORKING.
AT WHAT?
INDIANS.
WHERE'S THE TRIBE?
BJORNSTROM CLAIMS HE'S GOT RIGHTS TO THIS TERRITORY...
THE TRIBE-- WHERE ARE THEY? DID YOU BUY THEM OUT OR WHAT?
NOT EXACTLY.
BRING HIM ALONG. LET HIM SEE FOR HIMSELF.
WHY NOT? DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING, MISTER LOCKE, AND TELL YOUR CARRIER TO STAY WHERE HE IS.
LOCKE COULD SCARCELY KEEP PACE: HIS LIMBS WERE MORE RELUCTANT WITH EVERY STEP HE TOOK.
THEY HAD DUG A PIT IN A SMALL CLEARING NO MORE THAN A HUNDRED YARDS FROM THE COMPOUND. IT WAS NOT DEEP, THIS PIT, NOR WAS IT VERY LARGE.
AN EDUCATION.
THE MINGLED SMELLS OF LIME AND PETROL CANCELLED OUT ANY OTHER SCENT.

ALL OF THEM?
ONE FELL SWOOP.
BLANKETS.
BUT SO QUICKLY..
IT'S VERY EFFICIENT. AND DIFFICULT TO PROVE. EVEN IF ANYBODY EVER ASKS.
DISEASE IS NATURAL, YES? LIKE THE TREES.
I HEAR GOOD THINGS OF YOU. PERHAPS WE CAN WORK TOGETHER.
THE ELDER BORE A NEAT BULLET-HOLE IN HIS TEMPLE. DISEASE AND HOPELESSNESS HAD NOT BEEN ENTIRELY EFFICIENT, APPARENTLY.
SO IT GOES.
WE THOUGHT YOU WOULDN'T COME BACK.
STUMPF IS DEAD.
WELL, EVEN LESS TO DIVIDE UP.



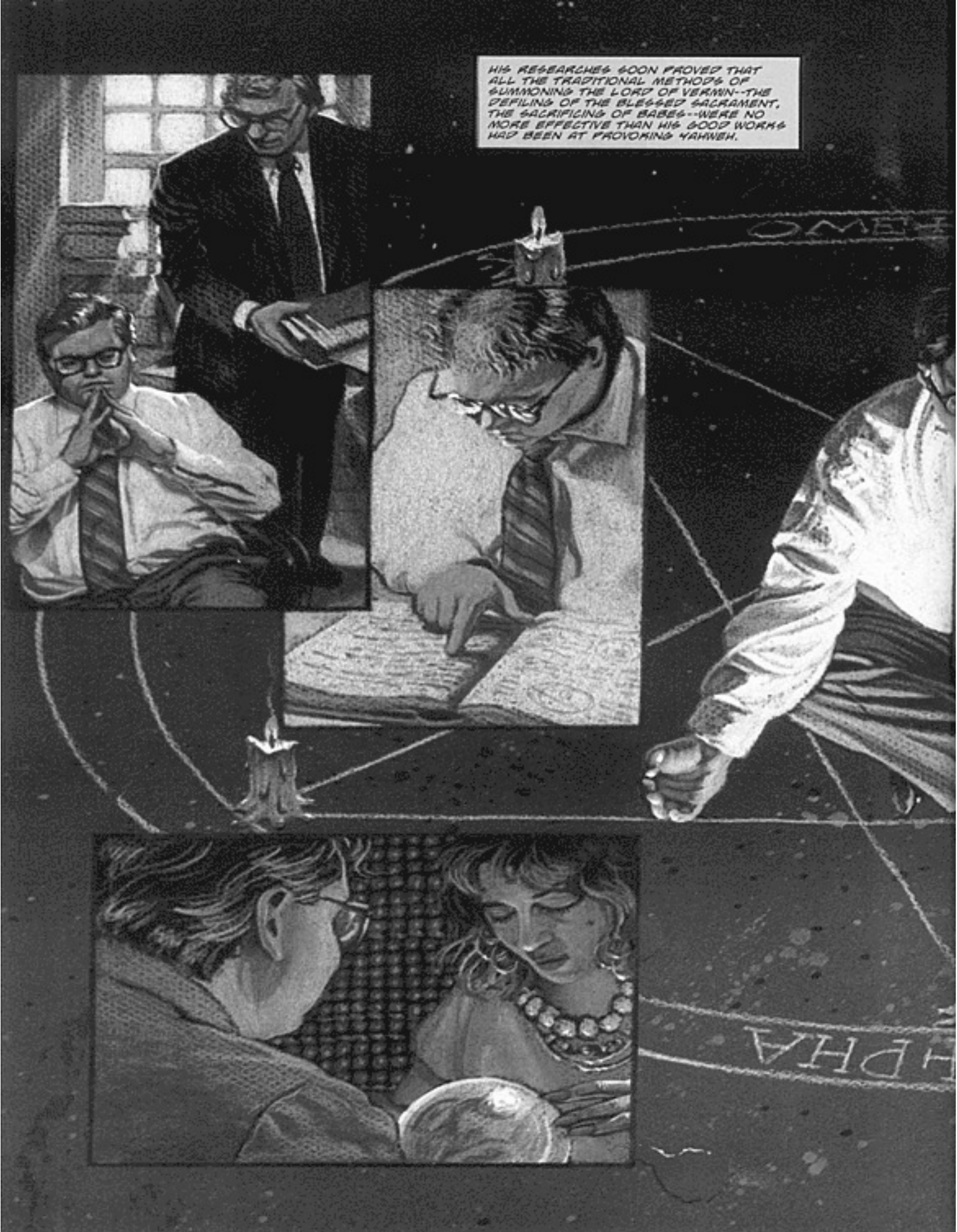
"WHAT IS IT THAT YOU'RE AFRAID OF, CARDINAL? THESE PEOPLE CAN DO LITTLE, IF ANY, HARM TO ANYONE. THEY ARE CLEARLY INSANE, AND I THINK, GIVEN TIME, THEY WILL DESTROY THEMSELVES."
"I AM AFRAID, DEMMING, AND AS FOR STOPPING THESE CONSPIRATORS OF HEAVEN, IT IS SIMPLY IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHURCH AND THE WORD OF GOD. IT IS OUR JOB. YOUR JOB."
"YOU THINK GREGORIUS SUCCEEDED. IS THAT IT?"
"YOUR QUESTIONS ARE BECOMING TIRING, DEMMING. I WANT YOU TO ASSEMBLE THE FATHERS AND SEND THEM ON THEIR WAY. I WANT DICKERSON FOUND AND BROUGHT BACK TO ME...I WANT THIS UNGODLY CHAPTER CLOSED ONCE AND FOR ALL."
"YES, SIR."

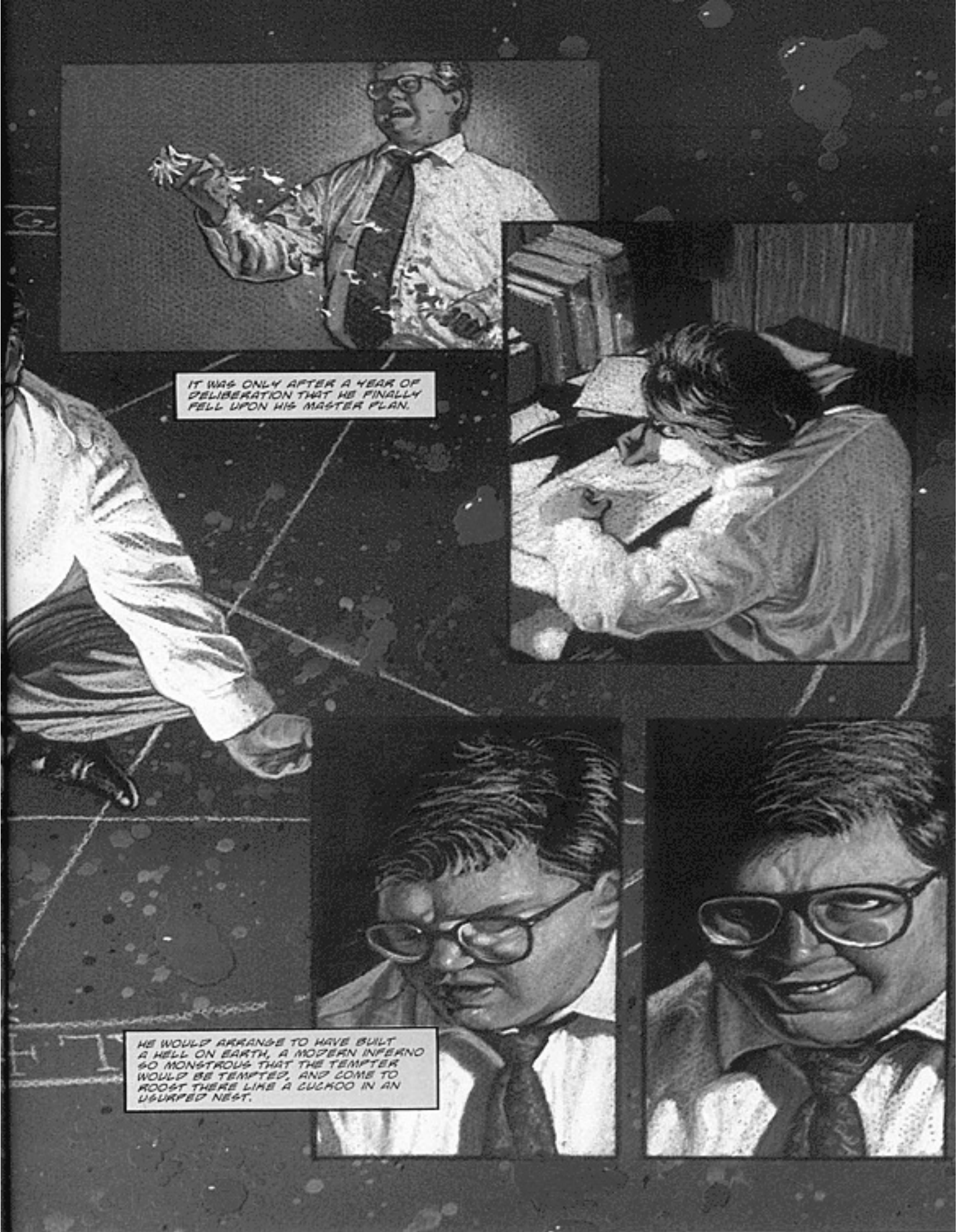
WARREN PICKERSON, IN THE NAME OF GOD THE FATHER YOU ARE UNDER ARREST.

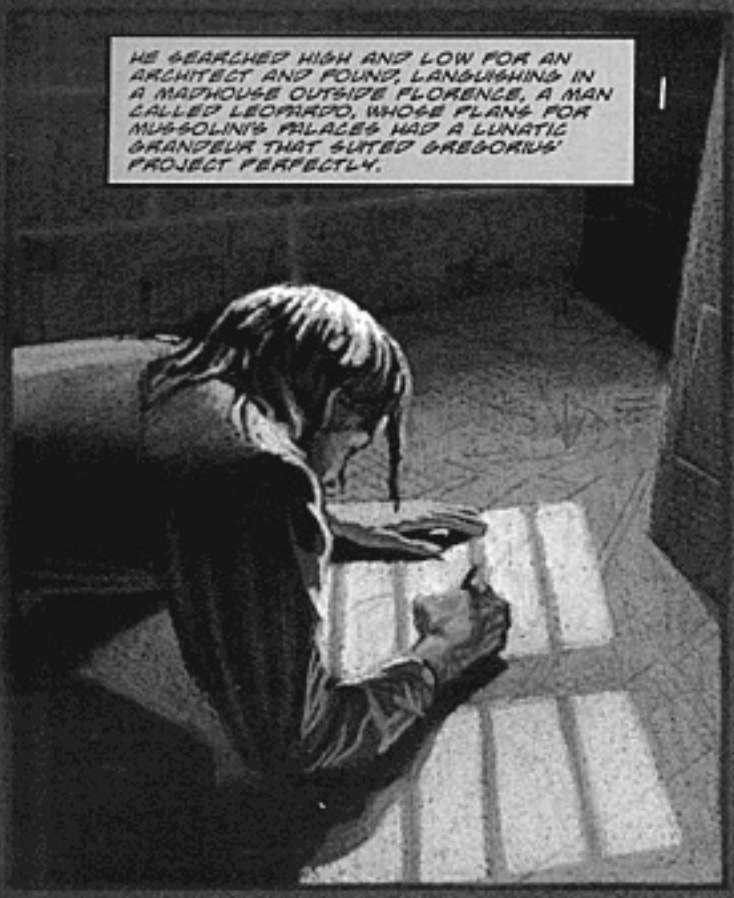

CIRCUMSTANCES HAD MADE GREGORIUS RICH BEYOND ALL CALCULATION. HE OWNED SO MUCH THAT TO THOSE WHO WERE FINALLY CHARGED WITH ENUMERATING HIS POSSESSIONS--WHEN THE EVENTS OF THIS STORY REACHED THEIR MONSTROUS CONCLUSION--IT SEEMED IT MIGHT BE QUICKER TO LIST THE ITEMS GREGORIUS DID NOT OWN.
RICH HE WAS, BUT FAR FROM HAPPY. HE HAD BEEN RAISED A CATHOLIC, AND IN HIS EARLY YEARS, BEFORE HIS DIZZYING RISE TO FORTUNE, HE'D FOUND SUCCOR IN HIS FAITH.
DOWN SATAN

BUT HE'D NEGLECTED IT, AND IT WAS ONLY AT THE AGE OF FIFTY-FIVE, WITH THE WORLD AT HIS FEET, THAT HE WOKE ONE NIGHT AND FOUND HIMSELF GODLESS.
IT WAS A BITTER BLOW, BUT HE IMMEDIATELY TOOK STEPS TO MAKE GOOD HIS LOSS. HE WENT TO ROME AND SPOKE WITH THE SUPREME PONTIFF; HE PRAYED NIGHT AND DAY; HE FOUNDED SEMINARIES AND LEPER COLONIES. GOD, HOWEVER, DECLINED TO SHOW SO MUCH AS HIS TOENAIL. GREGORIUS IT SEEMED, WAS FORSAKEN.
WHAT DO YOU WANT, DICKERSON?
IF YOU WILL LET ME, SIR, I THINK I CAN BE OF SOME HELP.
WELL?

IT WOULD SEEM TO ME, SIR, IF YOU DON'T MIND MY SAYING...
GO ON. EVEN A FOOL'S WORDS AT THIS TIME MAY SHED SOME LIGHT, NO MATTER HOW DULL IT SHINES.
THANK YOU, SIR. AHEM...WELL, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT IF THE ONE YOU SEEK REFUSES TO SHOW HIMSELF THEN YOU MUST GIVE HIM NO CHOICE.
DEFINE. BE SPECIFIC.
PERHAPS TO WIN YOUR WAY BACK INTO THE ARMS OF OUR MAKER YOU MUST PERHAPS PUT YOUR SOUL IN DIRECT JEOPARDY.
THE NOTION HAD SOME MERIT.
SUPPOSE I COULD CONTRIVE A MEETING WITH SATAN, THE ARCHFIEND. SEEING ME IN EXTREMIS, WOULD NOT GOD BE OBLIGATED TO STEP IN AND DELIVER ME TO THE FOLD?
IT WAS A FINE PLOT. BUT HOW WAS HE TO REALIZE IT?
THE DEVIL DID NOT JUST COME AT A CALL, EVEN FOR A TYCOON SUCH AS GREGORIUS.
BUT THERE HAD TO BE A WAY, AND GREGORIUS WOULD FIND IT.


HIS RESEARCHES SOON PROVED THAT ALL THE TRADITIONAL METHODS OF SUMMONING THE LORD OF VERMIN--THE DEFILING OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT, THE SACRIFICING OF BABES--WERE NO MORE EFFECTIVE THAN HIS GOOD WORKS HAD BEEN AT PROVOKING YAHWEH.

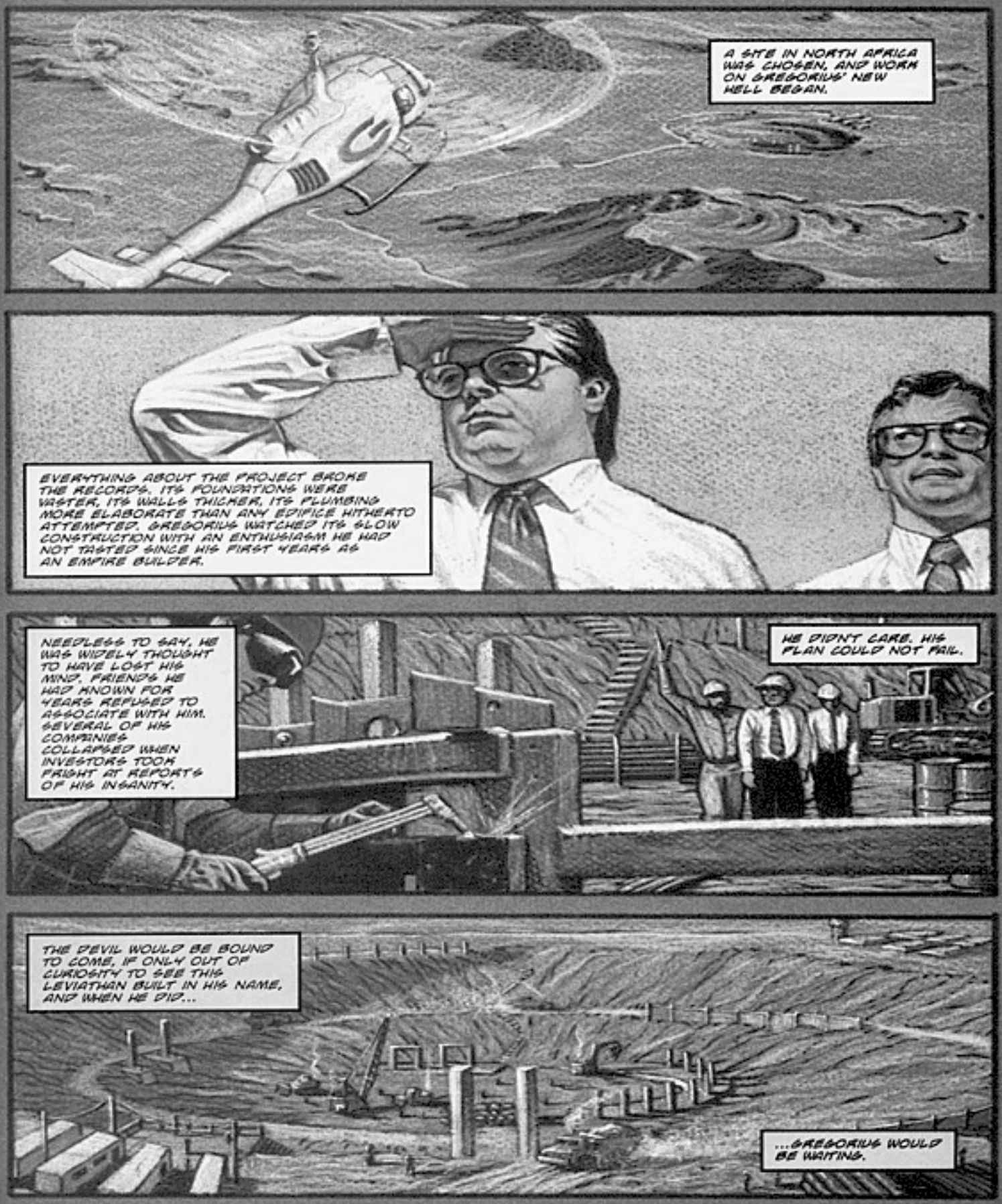

IT WAS ONLY AFTER A YEAR OF DELIBERATION THAT HE FINALLY FELL UPON HIS MASTER PLAN.
HE WOULD ARRANGE TO HAVE BUILT A HELL ON EARTH, A MODERN INFERNO SO MONSTROUS THAT THE TEMPTER WOULD BE TEMPTED, AND COME TO ROOST THERE LIKE A CUCKOO IN AN USURPED NEST.

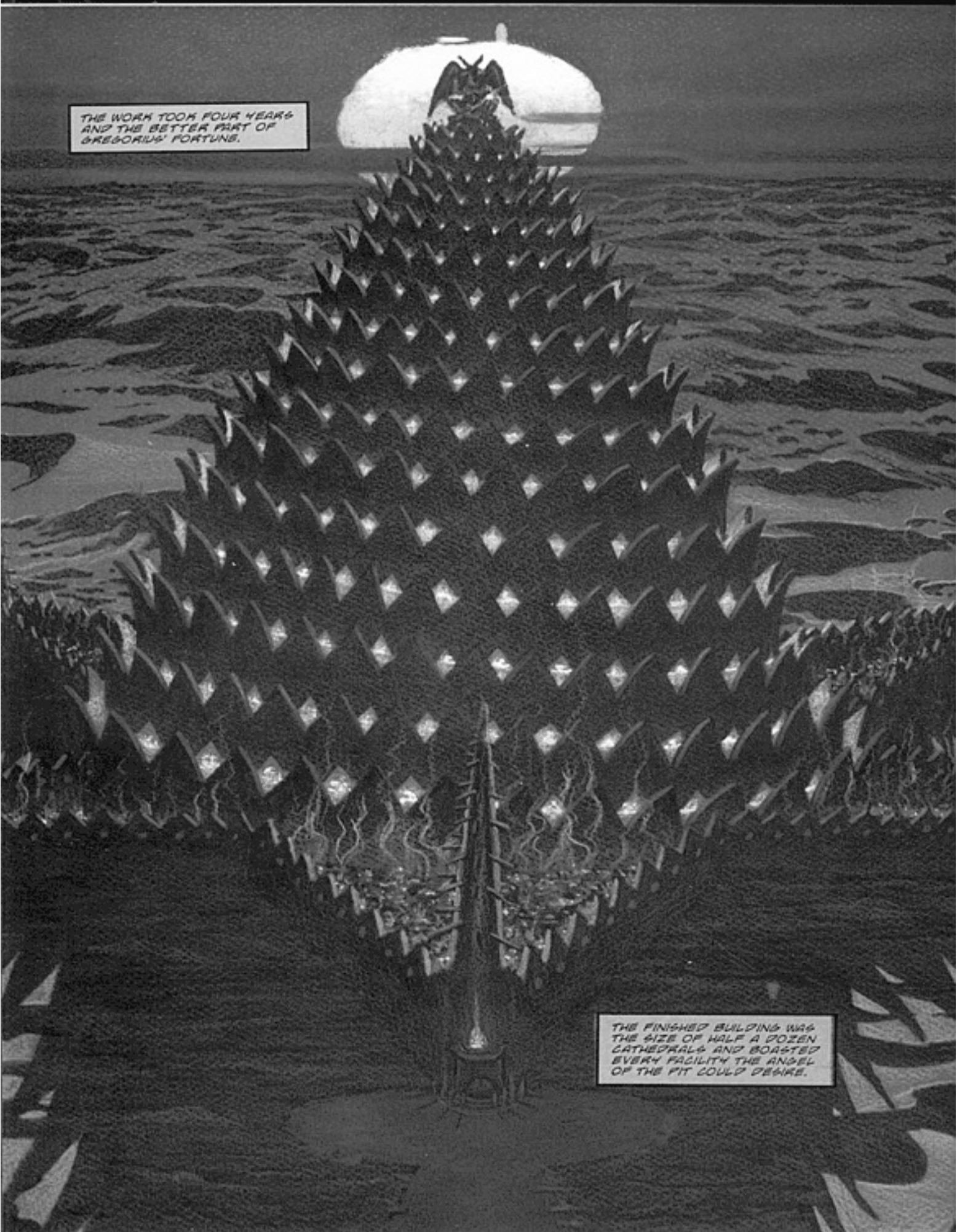

HE SEARCHED HIGH AND LOW FOR AN ARCHITECT AND FOUND, LANGUISHING IN A MADHOUSE OUTSIDE FLORENCE, A MAN CALLED LEONARDO, WHOSE PLANS FOR MUSSOLINI'S PALACES HAD A LUNATIC GRANDEUR THAT SUITED GREGORIUS' PROJECT PERFECTLY.

LEONARDO WAS TAKEN FROM HIS CELL-- A FETID, WRETCHED OLD MAN--AND GIVEN HIS DREAMS AGAIN. HIS GENIUS FOR THE PRODIGIOUS HAD NOT DESERTED HIM.

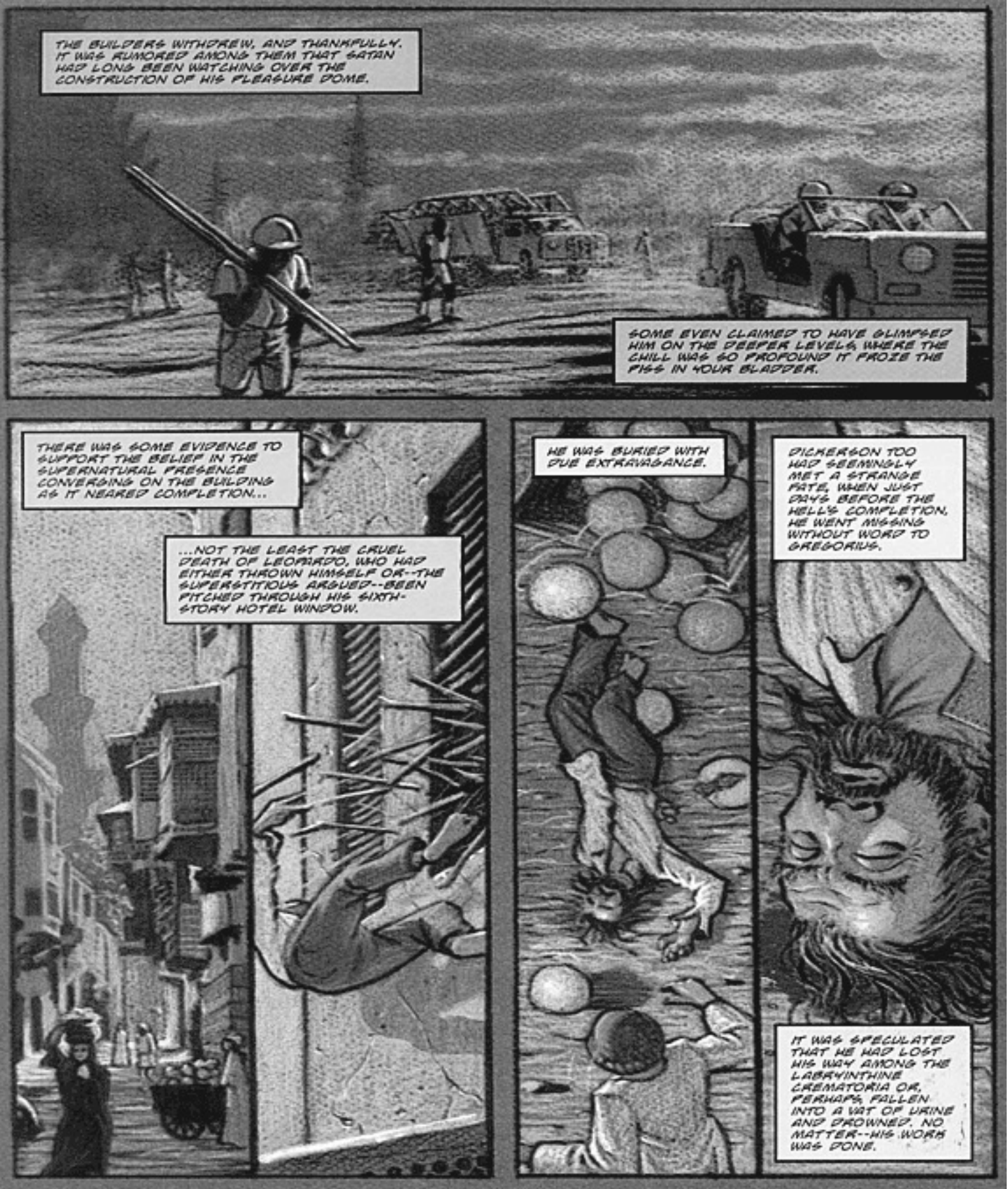
IN ORDER TO FUEL HIS INVENTION, THE GREAT LIBRARIES OF THE WORLD WERE SCOURED FOR DESCRIPTIONS OF HELL, BOTH SECULAR AND METAPHYSICAL.
MUSEUM VAULTS WERE RANSACKED FOR FORBIDDEN IMAGES OF MARTYRDOM.

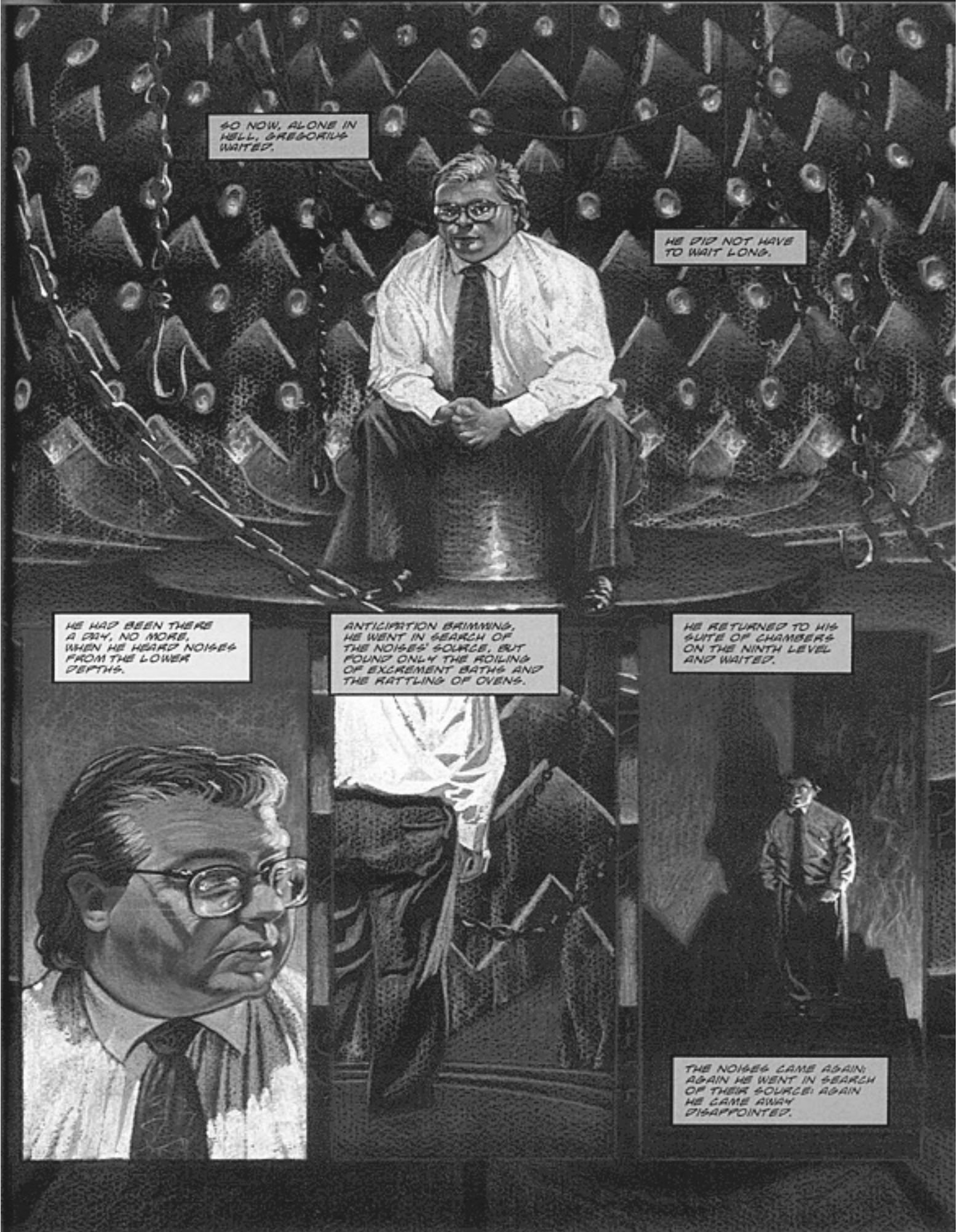
NO STONE WAS LEFT UNTURNED IF IT WAS SUSPECTED SOMETHING PERVERSE WAS CONCEALED BENEATH.
THE FINISHED DESIGNS OWED SOMETHING TO DE SADE AND TO DANTE, AND SOMETHING MORE TO FREUD AND KRAFFT-EBING, BUT THERE WAS ALSO MUCH THERE THAT NO MIND HAD CONCEIVED OF BEFORE, OR AT LEAST EVER DARED TO PUT ON PAPER.

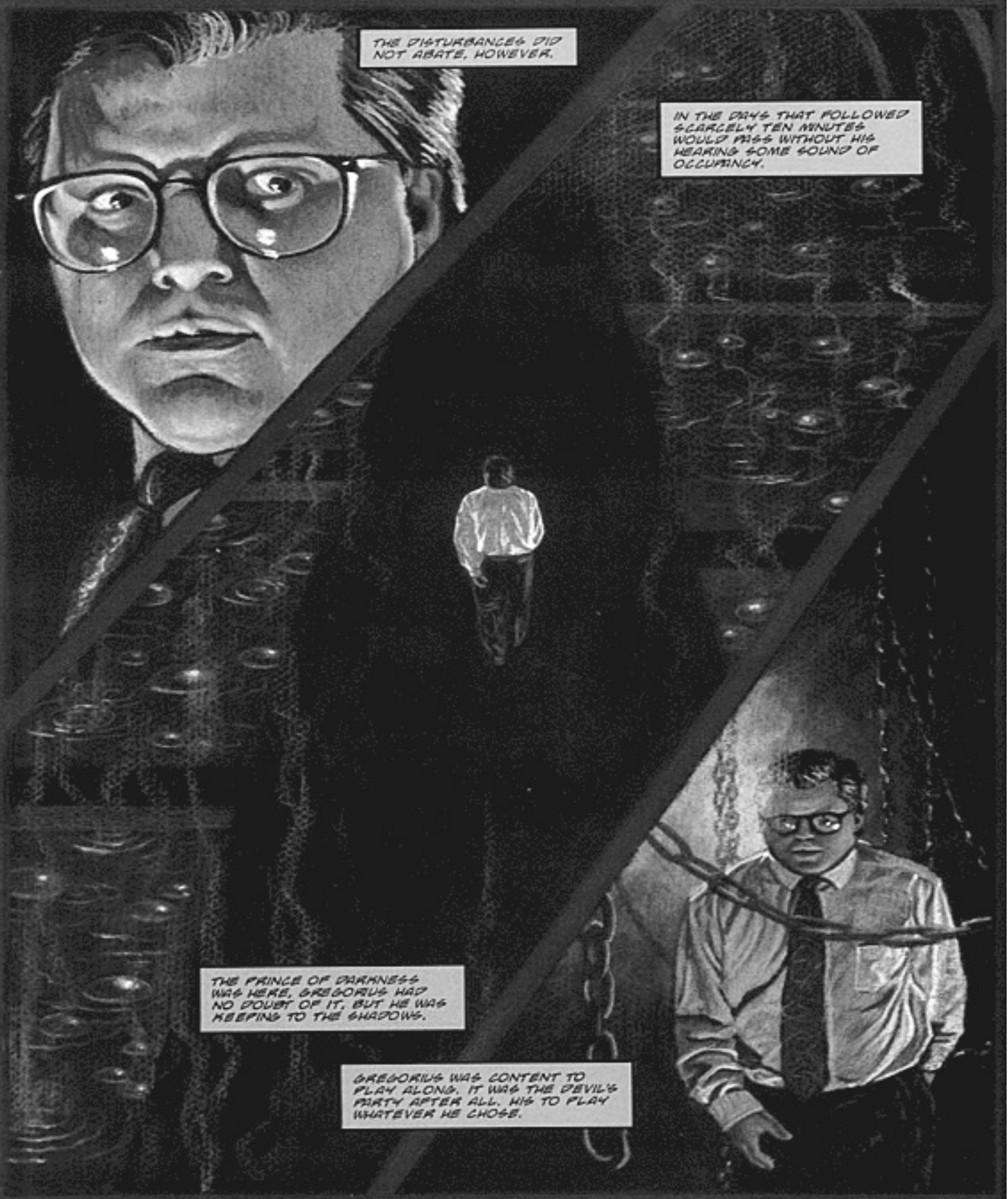

A SITE IN NORTH AFRICA WAS CHOSEN, AND WORK ON GREGORIUS' NEW HELL BEGAN.
EVERYTHING ABOUT THE PROJECT BROKE THE RECORDS. ITS FOUNDATIONS WERE VASTER, ITS WALLS THICKER, ITS PLUMBING MORE ELABORATE THAN ANY EDIFICE HITHERTO ATTEMPTED. GREGORIUS WATCHED ITS SLOW CONSTRUCTION WITH AN ENTHUSIASM HE HAD NOT TASTED SINCE HIS FIRST YEARS AS AN EMPIRE BUILDER.
NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WAS WIDELY THOUGHT TO HAVE LOST HIS MIND. FRIENDS HE HAD KNOWN FOR YEARS REFUSED TO ASSOCIATE WITH HIM. SEVERAL OF HIS COMPANIES COLLAPSED WHEN INVESTORS TOOK FRIGHT AT REPORTS OF HIS INSANITY.
HE DIDN'T CARE. HIS PLAN COULD NOT FAIL.
THE DEVIL WOULD BE BOUND TO COME, IF ONLY OUT OF CURIOSITY TO SEE THIS LEVIATHAN BUILT IN HIS NAME, AND WHEN HE DID...
...GREGORIUS WOULD BE WAITING.


THE WORK TOOK FOUR YEARS AND THE BETTER PART OF GREGORIUS' FORTUNE.
THE FINISHED BUILDING WAS THE SIZE OF HALF A DOZEN CATHEDRALS AND BOASTED EVERY FACILITY THE ANGEL OF THE PIT COULD DESIRE.

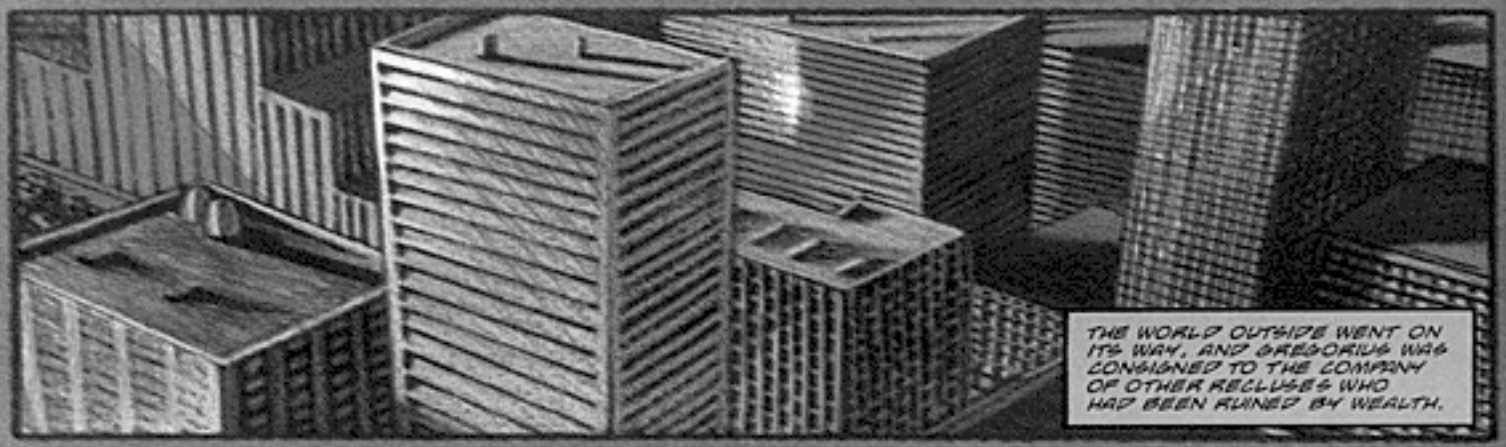
FIRES BURNED BEHIND ITS WALLS SO THAT TO WALK IN MANY OF ITS CORRIDORS WAS ALMOST UNENDURABLE AGONY. THE ROOMS OFF THOSE CORRIDORS WERE FITTED WITH EVERY IMAGINABLE DEVICE OF PERSECUTION THAT THE GENIUS OF SATAN'S TORTURES BE GIVEN FAIR EMPLOY.
THERE WERE OVENS LARGE ENOUGH TO CREMATE FAMILIES, POOLS DEEP ENOUGH TO DROWN GENERATIONS.
THE NEW HELL WAS AN ATROCITY WAITING TO HAPPEN! A CELEBRATION OF INHUMANITY THAT ONLY LACKED ITS FIRST CAUSE.

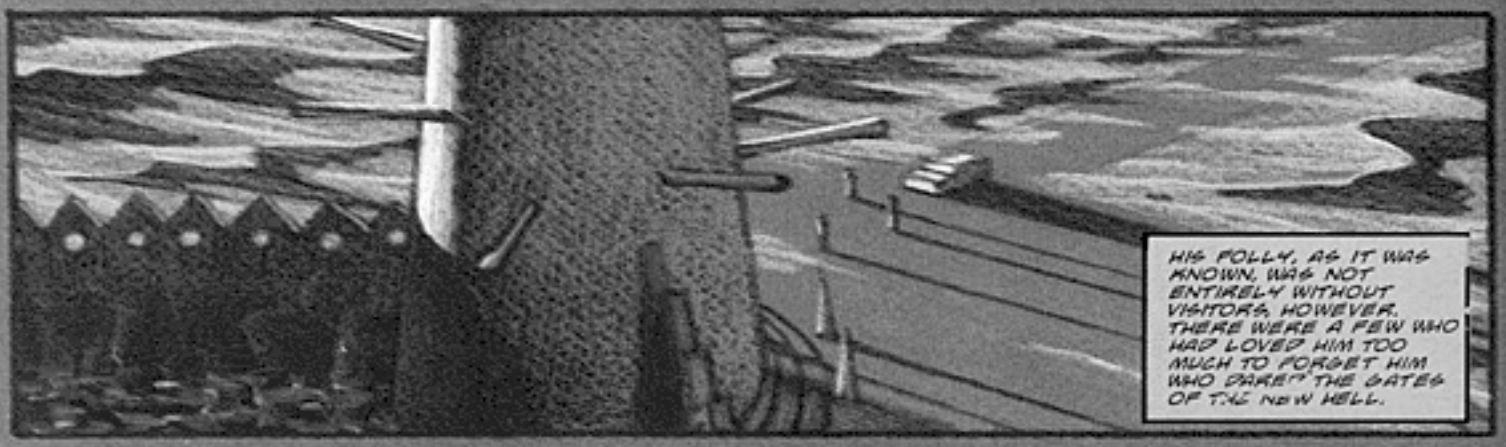

THE BUILDERS WITHDREW, AND THANKFULLY. IT WAS RUMORED AMONG THEM THAT SATAN HAD LONG BEEN WATCHING OVER THE CONSTRUCTION OF HIS PLEASURE DOME.
SOME EVEN CLAIMED TO HAVE GLIMPSED HIM ON THE DEEPER LEVELS, WHERE THE CHILL WAS SO PROFOUND IT FROZE THE PISS IN YOUR BLADDER.
THERE WAS SOME EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL PRESENCE CONVERGING ON THE BUILDING AS IT NEARED COMPLETION...
...NOT THE LEAST THE CRUEL DEATH OF LEONARDO, WHO HAD EITHER THROWN HIMSELF OR--THE SUPERSTITIOUS ARGUED--BEEN PITCHED THROUGH HIS SIXTH-STORY HOTEL WINDOW.
HE WAS BURIED WITH DUE EXTRAVAGANCE.
DICKERSON TOO HAD SEEMINGLY MET A STRANGE FATE, WHEN JUST DAYS BEFORE THE HELL'S COMPLETION, HE WENT MISSING WITHOUT WORD TO GREGORIUS.
IT WAS SPECULATED THAT HE HAD LOST HIS WAY AMONG THE LABYRINTHINE CREMATORIA OR, PERHAPS, FALLEN INTO A VAT OF URINE AND DROWNED. NO MATTER--HIS WORK WAS DONE.


SO NOW, ALONE IN HELL, GREGORIUS WAITED.
HE DID NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG.
HE HAD BEEN THERE A DAY, NO MORE, WHEN HE HEARD NOISES FROM THE LOWER DEPTHS.
ANTICIPATION BRIMMING, HE WENT IN SEARCH OF THE NOISES' SOURCE, BUT FOUND ONLY THE BOILING OF EXCREMENT BATHS AND THE RATTLING OF OVENS.
HE RETURNED TO HIS SUITE OF CHAMBERS ON THE NINTH LEVEL AND WAITED.
THE NOISES CAME AGAIN; AGAIN HE WENT IN SEARCH OF THEIR SOURCE; AGAIN HE CAME AWAY DISAPPOINTED.


THE DISTURBANCES DID NOT ABATE, HOWEVER.
IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED SCARCELY TEN MINUTES WOULD PASS WITHOUT HIS HEARING SOME SOUND OF OCCUPANCY.
THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS WAS HERE, GREGORIUS HAD NO DOUBT OF IT, BUT HE WAS KEEPING TO THE SHADOWS.
GREGORIUS WAS CONTENT TO PLAY ALONG. IT WAS THE DEVIL'S PARTY AFTER ALL. HIS TO PLAY WHATEVER HE CHOSE.

BUT DURING THE LONG AND OFTEN LONELY MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED, GREGORIUS WEARIED OF THIS HIDE AND SEEK AND BEGAN TO DEMAND THAT SATAN SHOW HIMSELF.
I KNOW YOU'RE HERE! COME FORWARD, DAMN YOU!
HIS VOICE RANG UNANSWERED DOWN THE DESERTED CORRIDORS, HOWEVER, UNTIL HIS THROAT WAS BRUISED WITH SHOUTING.
THEREAFTER HE WENT ABOUT HIS SEARCHES STEALTHILY, HOPING TO CATCH HIS TENANT UNAWARE.
BUT THE APOSTATE ANGEL ALWAYS FLITTED AWAY BEFORE GREGORIUS COULD STEP WITHIN SIGHT OF HIM.
THEY WOULD PLAY THE WAITING GAME, IT SEEMED, HE AND SATAN, CHASING EACH OTHER'S TAILS THROUGH ICE AND FIRE AND FIRE AND ICE AGAIN. GREGORIUS TOLD HIMSELF TO BE PATIENT.
THE DEVIL HAD COME, HADN'T HE?
WASN'T THAT HIS FINGERPRINT ON THE DOOR HANDLE? THE TURD ON THE STAIRS?
SOONER OR LATER THE FIEND WOULD SHOW HIS FACE, AND GREGORIUS WOULD SPIT ON IT.

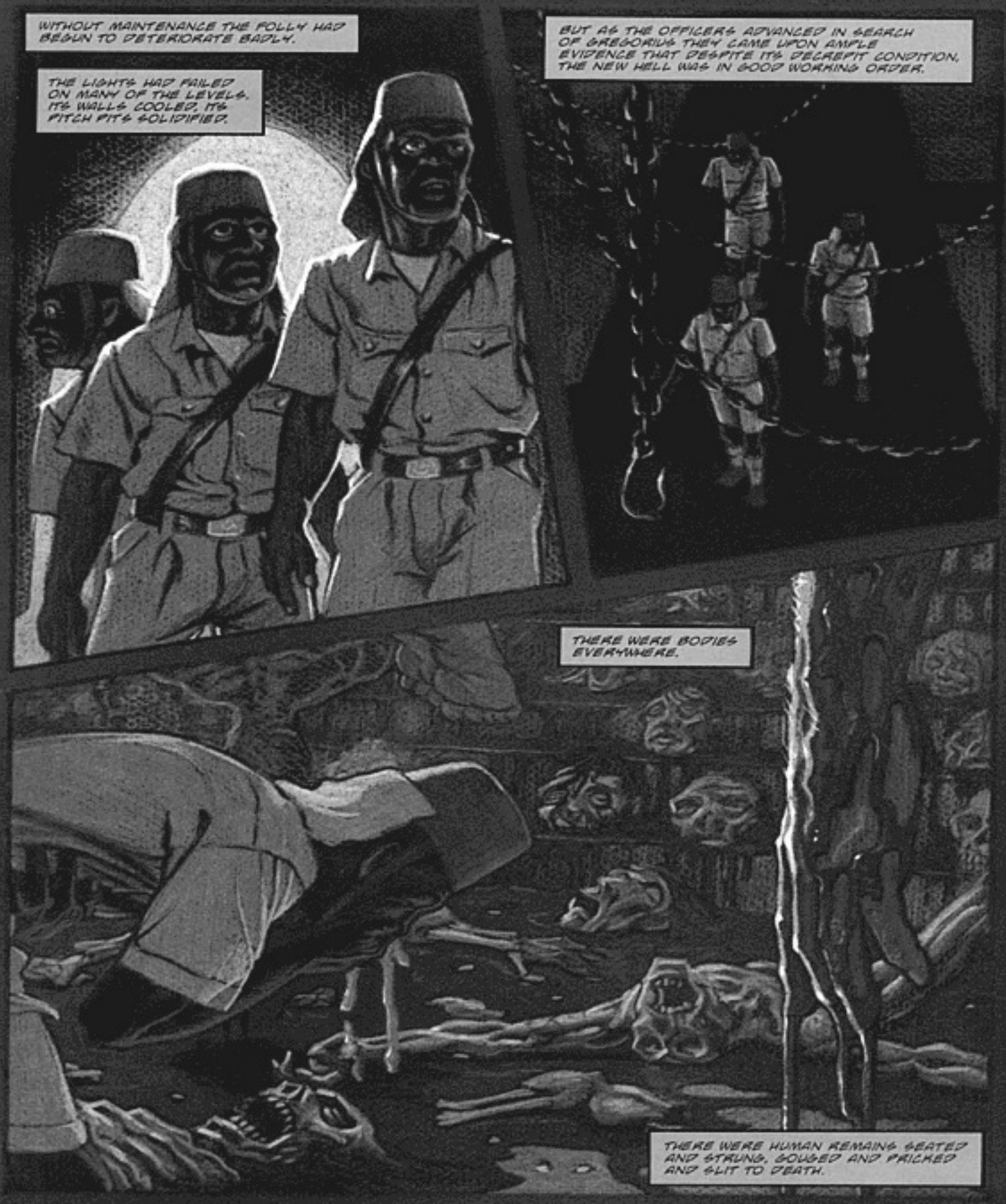

THE WORLD OUTSIDE WENT ON ITS WAY, AND GREGORIUS WAS CONSIGNED TO THE COMPANY OF OTHER RECLUSES WHO HAD BEEN RUINED BY WEALTH.


HIS FOLLY, AS IT WAS KNOWN, WAS NOT ENTIRELY WITHOUT VISITORS, HOWEVER. THERE WERE A FEW WHO HAD LOVED HIM TOO MUCH TO FORGET HIM WHO DARED THE GATES OF THE NEW HELL.

THESE VISITORS MADE THE JOURNEY WITHOUT ANNOUNCING THEIR INTENTIONS, FEARING THE DISAPPROVAL OF THEIR FRIENDS.

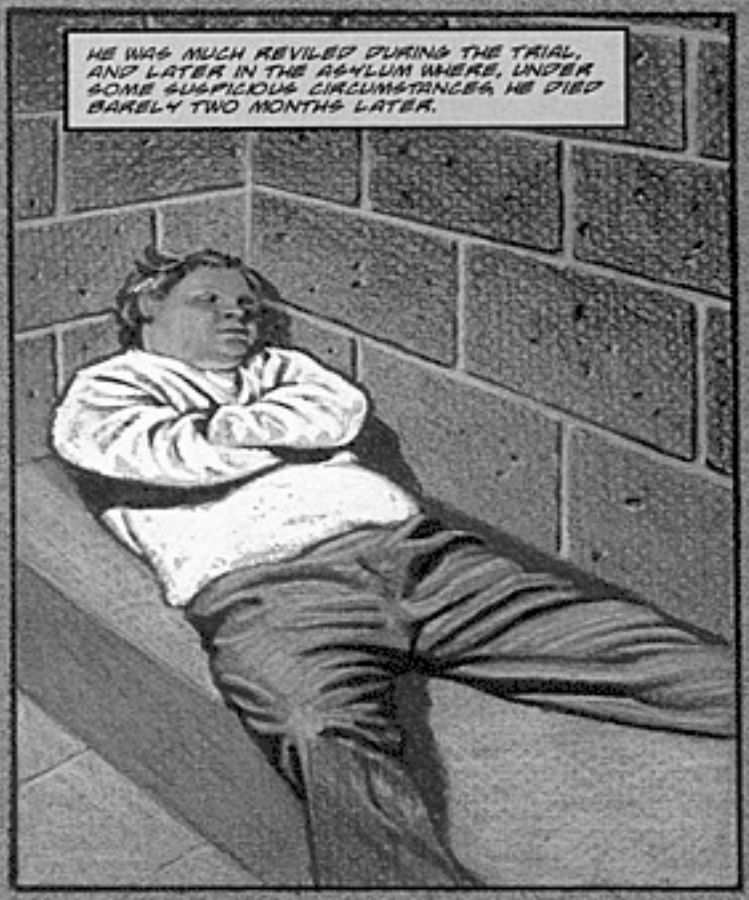
THE INVESTIGATIONS INTO THEIR SUBSEQUENT DISAPPEARANCE NEVER REACHED AS FAR AS NORTH AFRICA.

AND IN HIS FOLLY GREGORIUS STILL CHASED THE SERPENT, AND THE SERPENT STILL ELUDED HIM, LEAVING ONLY MORE AND MORE TERRIBLE SIGNS OF HIS OCCUPANCY AS THE MONTHS WENT BY.
...AND YOU KNOW THE REST.
WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOUR MOUTH, IN YOUR WORDS.
FROM WHAT I'VE GATHERED, IT WAS THE WIFE OF ONE O THE MISSING VISITORS W FINALLY DISCOVERED TH TRUTH AND ALERTED THE AUTHORITIES.
THIS WAS WHEN THEY PUT GREGORIUS UNDER SURVEILLANCE, AND THEN THOSE MEN, THE POLICE, WENT INTO THE NEW HELL...


WITHOUT MAINTENANCE THE FOLLY HAD BEGUN TO DETERIORATE BADLY.
THE LIGHTS HAD FAILED ON MANY OF THE LEVELS. ITS WALLS COOLED, ITS PITCH FITS SOLIDIFIED.
BUT AS THE OFFICERS ADVANCED IN SEARCH OF GREGORIUS THEY CAME UPON AMPLE EVIDENCE THAT DESPITE ITS DECREPIT CONDITION, THE NEW HELL WAS IN GOOD WORKING ORDER.
THERE WERE BODIES EVERYWHERE.
THERE WERE HUMAN REMAINS SEATED AND STRUNG, GOUGED AND PRICKED AND SLIT TO DEATH.

THEIR TERROR GREW WITH EVERY DOOR THEY FORCED OPEN. EVERY ABOMINATION THEIR FEVERED EYES FELL UPON.
TWO OF THE FOUR WHO CROSSED THE THRESHOLD NEVER REACHED THE CHAMBER AT ITS CENTER.
...ONLY TO BE WAYLAID IN SOME CHOKED PASSAGE-WAY AND ADDED TO THE HUNDREDS WHO HAD PERISHED IN THE FOLLY SINCE SATAN HAD TAKEN RESIDENCE.
TERROR OVERTOOK THEM ON THEIR WAY AND THEY FLED...
THERE WAS NO SIGN OF SATAN, OF COURSE. THERE WAS ONLY GREGORIUS, THE MASTER BUILDER. FINDING NO ONE TO INHABIT THE HOUSE HE'D SWEATED OVER, HAD OCCUPIED IT HIMSELF.
GREGORIUS DID NOT RESIST HIS ARREST.
HE HAD WITH HIM A FEW DISCIPLES WHOM HE'D MUSTERED OVER THE YEARS. THEY, LIKE HIM, SEEMED UNREMARKABLE CREATURES. BUT THERE WAS NOT A TORTURE DEVICE IN THE BUILDING THEY HAD NOT MADE THOROUGH AND MERCILESS USE OF.
INDEED HE SEEMED PLEASED THAT HE WOULD HAVE A PLATFORM FROM WHICH HE COULD BOAST HIS BUTCHERIES.

LATER AT HIS TRIAL, HE SPOKE FREELY OF HIS AMBITION AND HIS APPETITE: AND OF HOW MUCH MORE BLOOD HE WOULD SPILL IF THEY WOULD ONLY SET HIM FREE TO DO SO.
"ENOUGH TO DROWN ALL BELIEF AND ITS DELUSIONS-- AND STILL I'D NOT BE SATISFIED. FOR GOD IS ROTTING IN PARADISE, AND SATAN IN THE ABYSS, AND WHO IS TO STOP ME?"


HE WAS MUCH REVILED DURING THE TRIAL, AND LATER IN THE ASYLUM WHERE, UNDER SOME SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES, HE DIED BARELY TWO MONTHS LATER.

THE VATICAN EXPUNGED ALL REPORT OF HIM FROM ITS RECORDS.
THE SEMINARIES FOUNDED IN HIS UNHOLY NAME WERE DISSOLVED.

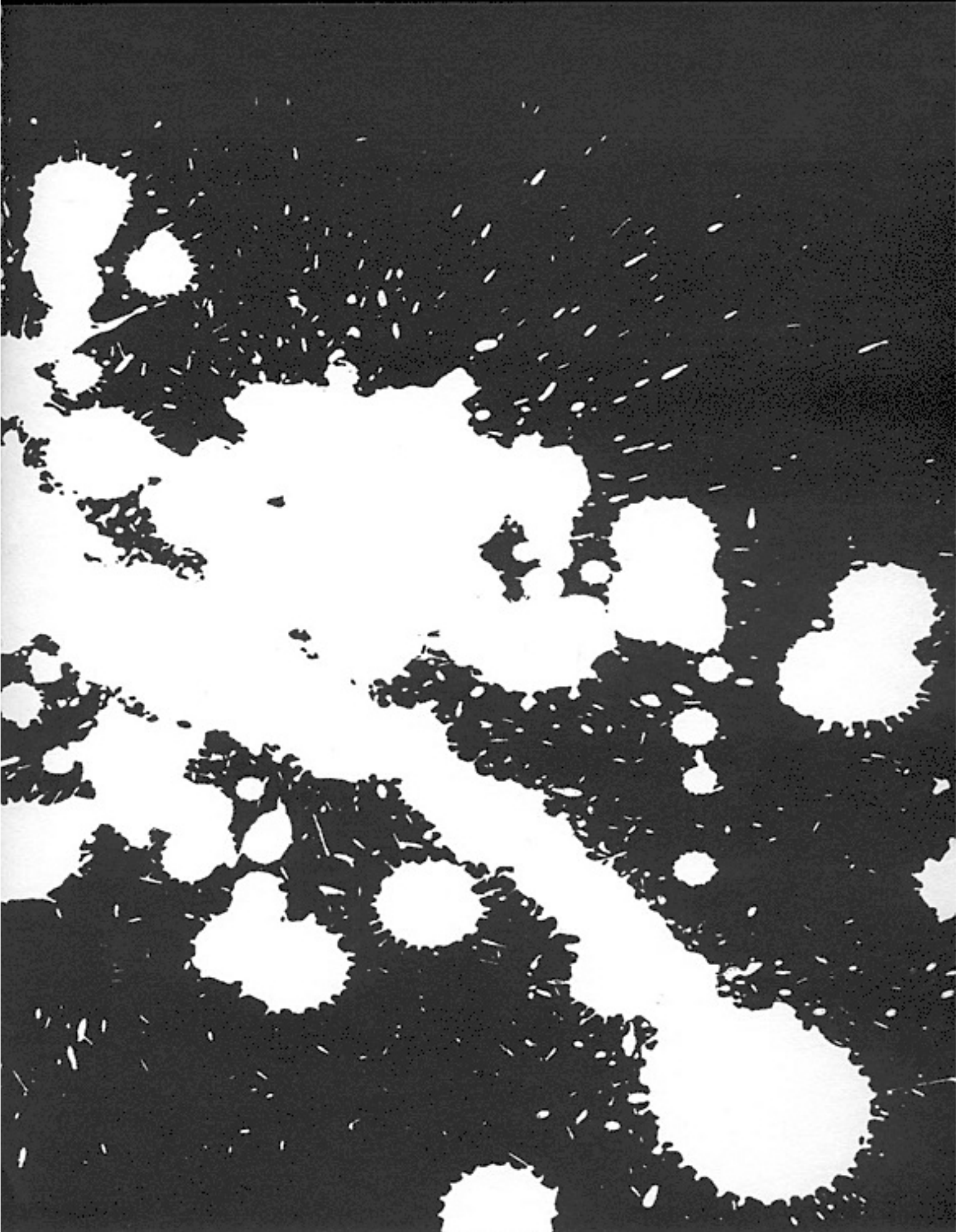
BUT THERE WERE THOSE AMONG THE CARDINALS WHO COULD NOT PUT GREGORIUS' UNREPENTANT MALICE OUT OF THEIR HEADS.
...AND THAT'S ALL I KNOW, THAT'S ALL I CAN TELL YOU, I SWEAR.
THERE IS ONE QUESTION REMAINING...WHERE WERE YOU ALL THE TIME YOU WERE SAID TO BE GONE?

I...I WAS THERE. I NEVER LEFT. I HID FROM GREGORIUS. NOT BECAUSE I WAS AFRAID, NOT AT ALL. I SIMPLY SAW WHAT HE WAS AND KNEW HE NEEDED TO BE ALONE TO BECOME IT.
AND THOSE CARDINALS, IN THE PRIVACY OF THEIR POWERS, WONDERED IF GREGORIUS HAD NOT SUCCEEDED IN HIS STRATEGY.

WELL, I SUPPOSE THAT'S ABOUT ALL, THEN.
THEY WONDERED IF, IN GIVING UP ALL HOPE OF ANGELS, FALLEN OR OTHERWISE, GREGORIUS HAD NOT BECOME ONE HIMSELF.

BAM!
OR ALL THAT EARTH COULD BEAR OF SUCH A PHENOMENA.

The End



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